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DETECTIVE
STORIES

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The
**DEADLY
ONE**

by

Robert A. Garron



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PRIVATE

DETECTIVE

STORIES



September, 1942

Vol. 11, No. 4

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The names and descriptions of all characters appearing in this magazine are entirely fictitious. If there is any resemblance either in name or description, to any living person, it is purely a coincidence.

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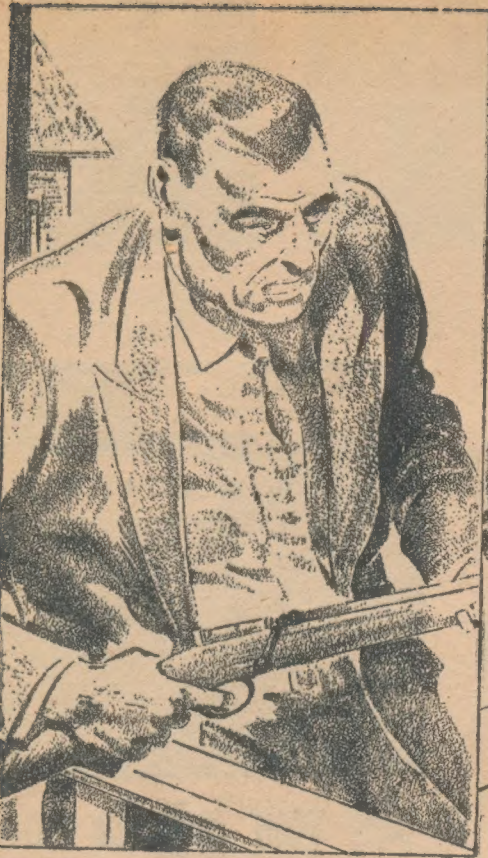
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**A COMPLETE
SHORT NOVEL**

**By
ROBERT
A.
GARRON**



For a policewoman, Middie was a broth of a girl, and she had what it takes to get a man without using a gun. But when she met Carpenter, she had to prove she could be as tough as he was, because he had killed one girl, and she was next on his list



HE ex-Commissioner of Parks and Playgrounds of Middletown, Cyril Carpenter, was unpleasantly surprised. In fact, he was shocked, and he stood still for two long seconds, watching.

His room was Number 11 on the top floor of the Baldwin Hotel, in the neighboring town of the same name.

And it was merely a room of moderate proportions, including a shower-stall instead of a bathtub. The hotel was seven stories high. Carpenter was in the bathroom, and Georgia Brooke, the girl, was out there busy-ing herself at the bed.

The management did not concern itself about a woman going to a man's room, in the first place, unless

The DEADLY ONE

She cut at him desperately
with the dangling handcuff,
but didn't stun him.



there was a ruckus. Besides, Georgia left the elevator at the fifth floor and walked the rest of the way.

Whiskey, soda, and a bowl of ice had been sent up. Since neither of them cared for soda, Carpenter had gone to the shower room for water.

He turned on the tap and let it run to get cold. Just previously, Georgia had been sitting on the single-width bed, and he had been smiling down at her. She was a blonde, slim and curvaceous, her eyes bright and blue and typical; her hair was the color

of fresh cornsilk and had the same slight curl. Her dress matched her curves very, very well, and Carpenter didn't forget legs like hers. She was wearing a dress with a high neck; it zippered down the back, and he always thought that dresses like that looked as though they had been put on backwards, except that this one had pockets in the right place, big enough to hold a half dollar each. He rested his hands on her shoulders, kissed her.

And then he was in the shower room, letting the water run cold, and smiling.

He filled one glass with water, then the other. With both hands occupied he fumbled with the tap, trying to turn it off. He couldn't do it with his wrist, and he thought, what the hell. He could come back and turn it off. So he turned around with the glasses in his hands, and the first thing he saw was Georgia, through the crack of the door. She was in motion. He was in shirt-sleeves, having draped his coat over the head of the bed. She was going through his pockets, fast. She had assumed that he was still trying to get colder water, because the tap was still making a noise.

She picked up his jacket and wrung it, trying to find something hidden. She grasped it from top to bottom, quickly, and she found the hidden pocket. Out of it she drew a leather notebook, which she glanced at and thrust into her purse, working the snap carefully so that it didn't make a sound.

She had been his secretary. Now she had the same job with his successor. Come to think of it, she wanted all the money she could get.

Her mouth wasn't soft. It was hard and shiny with lipstick, and her eyes were calculating. Her calculations didn't bother him very much, but he was annoyed that she should take him for such a sucker.

SETTING a glass down for a moment, he turned off the tap and returned to the room. Her eyes were entirely guileless as she smiled up at him. He was a large, gaunt man over six feet tall, with graying hair; he smiled down on her benevolently. Such a clever girl. He wondered how she had found out about his racket. Probably she had added up a few scraps of information down at the office, or she might even have eavesdropped some time when he was talking with his agent, John Gogg. It made no difference, except that he had to get back that slim little book. Later.

Meanwhile he fixed the drinks, casually tossing her purse aside so that he could sit down with her.

He had always liked the gals, and the fact that this one was unscrupulous made her more interesting. He talked ramblingly and with erudition, planting a fatherly hand upon her knee, keeping her occupied mentally and physically. He was very methodical, taking a drink and putting it down to kiss her, as though the act were a punctuation mark in a sentence. In any case she submitted, much like a patient in a dentist's chair, smiling because the thing she had come after was safe in her purse. After tonight she would be in the money.

Proximity to Carpenter meant that a girl would soon be disheveled, and Georgia was no exception.

Finally he said, "How about combining business with pleasure? I'd like to finish those sketches."

Very few people knew about his hobby: He was—or considered himself an artist. But she had modeled for him before; and that was, in fact, his excuse for having her here tonight.

"All right," she said, and began disrobing. "Are you sure this is business?"

"Certainly." He tucked a twenty among her things.

She thought—the old goat; with all the women in the world, he'd pay twenty dollars just to see one without any clothes on. Because she didn't think he was much of an artist; he had never let her see the sketches he'd made of her.

She wasn't entirely correct.

He asked her to turn around, and she did, first putting her shoes on so that she wouldn't get her feet dirty on the rug. Keeping her mirth to herself, she followed his directions. If this was fun for the old boy, fine. Apparently he was comparing in his mind normal conditions with how a girl's body actually looked in the same circumstances. Her composure was aloof, as though she were modeling a gown instead of moving about *sans*.

However, she was poetry to watch, with her shapeliness, and she got interested in herself. She looked down and decided that there was no question about her legs. She had just shaved them, and gleams highlighted the contours as she moved.

Because Carpenter had her light a cigarette as though she were doing it at a cocktail party, had her

straighten a picture on the wall. . . . He asked her to touch the floor with her legs straight, knees locked; she could do better than that, and pressed the flat of her hands against the rug.

All the while, he was making quick sketches on a small drawing pad: as she walked like a girl merely going down the street, or sat, or danced by herself, and so on. Really she didn't think that he was doing any drawing at all; just pretending.

AFTER several drinks she was back in her clothes again. She turned her head, with her back to a large mirror, to make sure that her stocking seams were straight. There was little doubt in her mind that Carpenter was drunk, because she had kept pouring some of the contents of her glass into his. Actually she had had only a few ounces from the bottle, which was now empty.

She made ready to go, tucking the twenty-dollar bill, folded across and across, into the top of her stocking. He grinned at the sight of the smooth long leg. Then she came back to get her purse.

"I've heard all kinds of stories about the amount of junk a girl keeps in her purse," he said. "Let's see."

He picked up the purse.

"No!" she exclaimed, and jerked it out of his hand.

"What's the matter?" he asked, pretending blankness.

She didn't know his capacity, for he wasn't drunk at all. He was having some grim fun with her. But she sensed that something was wrong, backed a step away from him.

Rising slowly, he smiled at her and said, "Let's be friends. Just give

me back the notebook you took from my coat. I saw you take it from my coat when I was getting cold water in the bathroom. You put the notebook in your purse."

She sneered with anger and fear, saying, "So you knew it all the time!"

"Well, give it back," he said mildly.

Pretending to work at the snap on the purse, she suddenly made for the door. Her skirt wrapped around her legs in spiral folds, and she nearly fell before she seized the doorknob. There was also a dead-lock on the door, and she tried that when the knob wouldn't work. But that time Carpenter had reached her; he was old, but he was big and powerful and fast. With one blow he swiped her to one side, so hard that she looked as though she had thrown her precious purse away. He watched it tumble across the rug toward the bed.

And then there was a *clunk*. He had sent her spinning, and when she fell, her head struck the radiator under the window with her full weight. She turned over and fell to the floor on her face, with her skirt up and showing the smooth, satiny sheen of her pantie-girdle, plus her intriguing roundness. He kept looking at her for a while, and she lay still.

He walked to the purse and picked it up, and took out the notebook which she had stolen. He replaced the book in the "secret" pocket of his jacket, and put the jacket on but didn't button it.

"Damned little meddler," he grumbled.

He couldn't leave her lying there like that, so he went over and

crouched beside her. His big fingers couldn't find her pulse. Irritated, he knelt and rested his head on her breast, and listened and listened. There wasn't any heartbeat; she wasn't breathing; she was dead. He was so astonished that he stared at her parted lips for a full minute, crouching. The crime was something that he didn't want to believe.

Eventually he grunted as he pulled himself erect. He walked to the window and looked out, across the way and down below at the street.

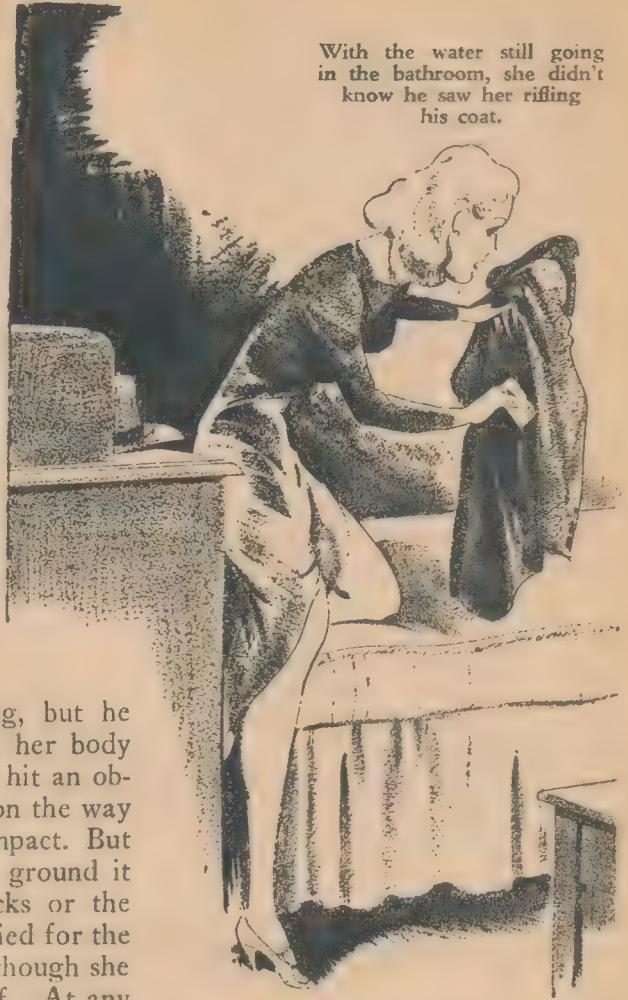
The sidewalks of the town of Baldwin had been rolled up for the night, and there were no persons framed in windows, that he could see.

He picked up his quondam secretary without bothering to straighten her dress; it wouldn't matter now. But he stood still again with his ear pressed tight against her breast. No heartbeat. She wasn't breathing. Quite dead.

He proceeded to the window with her, cradling her body in his powerful arms, and looked out again; there were no watchers. At last he looked down at her; her head was hanging as though her neck was broken, and her blond hair trailed in a neat bunch, swinging.

Shaking his head, Carpenter put her on the window-sill. He seized her by the wrists and lowered her from the window. Bracing himself, he started swinging her. He swung her back and forth like a pendulum, in a longer and longer arc; when he really had her going he gave her weight an extra heave and let go.

IMMEDIATELY he got away from the window; he couldn't



With the water still going
in the bathroom, she didn't
know he saw her rifling
his coat.

help waiting and listening, but he didn't hear any sound of her body landing. She might have hit an obstruction on the building on the way down, reducing her final impact. But when she finally came to ground it would be on cement blocks or the asphalt street. He had tried for the latter, to make it look as though she had jumped from the roof. At any rate, she had to land some distance away from the point under his window. He must have thrown her a good twenty feet or so to one side. To put it mildly, he did not care to be suspected.

Unhurriedly he cleaned up. He had drawn the shade at once. The light was dim, but sufficient, coming from a forty-watt bulb in a table lamp, and he moved about inspecting objects and surfaces. There was a patch of powder on the rug; he rubbed it in methodically and

scraped up the nap again with the rim of his shoe. Then he almost cursed out loud, for the most obvious thing was right there where he had put it, as though it were included with the room's furnishings. Her purse. He thought of going up to the roof and leaving the purse there, but that would be taking an extra chance.

Looking out the window carefully by pulling the blind back, he tried to find the spot where her body had fallen. The angle was bad; he

couldn't see close enough to the building. Anyhow, there was no excitement down below. No people around. Baldwin rolled up its sidewalks, literally, in the outlying districts if not here in town. So he pitched her purse out the window and watched it hit in the street, tumble along the wet gutter. It was too far below for him to hear a sound.

He had washed the liquor glasses in soap and water, washed the lipstick off her glass. The lipstick on his face—he had forgotten that, and went to the shower room.

Nothing else. On his way out, he spotted a handkerchief tucked behind a chair cushion, and for once in his life began cursing women and their eccentricities and lapses. He had to go through the whole place again, and he found three blond hairpins, a blond hair on himself, and a small smear of Georgia's lipstick on the chromium bottom of the bathroom mirror.

No doubt her perfume lingered in the air, but it would soon be absorbed by the hotel's own smell and disappear from human reckoning.

He had a large briefcase, worn and shiny, containing a travel kit, an extra necktie, shirt, pair of socks, and a few odds and ends of papers. He hauled this out from under the bed and snapped the locks.

After a last look around, and a methodical prowling through the cramped premises, scrutinizing everything, Carpenter locked the door.

He merely nodded at the elevator lad.

AT THE desk he turned in his key and asked whether he was

right about such and such a train for Chicago. The clerk flipped through a folder, found a page, looked, and said that he was right.

Noting Carpenter's baggy eyes he remarked, "I've got some good stuff if you want it. No harm. Peps you up. Benzedrine."

"Never heard of it."

The clerk produced a pill from a bottle, and with it a glass of water from a cooler.

"Sure of this?" Carpenter asked.

"Absolutely. In a half hour you can run forty miles and laugh at Indians."

Carpenter popped the pill down his throat and chased it with the cold water. He laid down five dollars for a tip, and in return received a small green bottle full of more benziez.

As he walked down the street Carpenter muttered, "Some damn' stuff. Chiseling. Everybody chiseling."

But the stuff had an effect. He walked three blocks down, one block to the right, and found his car in a parking lot. The lot was closed, and he hammered futilely on the door of a shack, thinking that the attendant was asleep in there. He was working himself up into a fury when he stalked down the aisles of the lot and found his car. It was open. He looked all over, and then found his keys wrapped up in a piece of paper in the dash compartment. The paper had writing on it: "Dear Mister: I had to go home. I got a worry telephone call in the office. I don't know what to do with the keys. If you don't find them, I call you tomorrow, next day."

Call him tomorrow? Carpenter relaxed. The man didn't know him, didn't know his number. Probably

he had a wife who suddenly was taken ill or was having a baby and was out of his wits.

Carpenter backed the car out, stopping at the gate to drop a quarter into the collection box. Habit.

There was no one in sight except a tall man walking along gloomily with his head down, seeing nothing. There was a hamburger shop across the street, where the counterman was diligently scraping and cleaning his stove, but he had no customers, and his back was turned.

Carpenter slipped his car down an incline into the street, letting his car into gear hopefully. The motor caught without his using the starter, and he let it crawl down the street, in the strange town, in low, before he pulled hard on the gear lever and shifted expertly into high.

He used the accelerator cautiously and rode as though he were a tourist rambling through an unknown town, looking for highway signs. He got out of town, and then he put his foot down, and in the powerful car he began to roll on the good highway through the night. These were the best highways in the world. As smooth as a pool table in straight distances. And banked, when necessary, with such science that it wasn't necessary to cut down on initial speed. Wonderful roads. Wonderful.

He was speeding along, trying to escape from that hotel in the neighboring town. His hands hung loosely on the wheel like a man thoughtlessly working his fingers on prison bars.

With his knees jammed up against the wheel, at nearly eighty miles an hour, on a safe fourteen-mile straightaway, he lighted a cigarette.

Wind hit the car like a giant, soft fist, and as it careened he snapped his hands around the wheel's rim.

He slanted near the soft shoulder of the highway, which was planted with wild oats to make it firm, and then took the tarline down the middle of the highway, with his lights on bright.

Shock was a funny thing. He still didn't feel the weight and grimness of having killed a human being. But he was breathing in small breaths now, and he drove as fast as the devil.

A half hour later, he slowed down, and drove at a normal speed, smiling. He lit another cigarette, and traveled at a moderate thirty-five miles an hour, and scratched his head. He was all alone on the road and had an open way. He speeded up, deciding that it would be a good idea to vanish for a while.

He had money. He bought food in tin cans when he passed through little towns, and some bottles. Bottled coffee, bottled milk. Bottled gin and whiskey. Bottled odds and ends. But mostly cans.

And he disappeared completely.

CHAPTER II

Picture of a Killer



UNNO," said Joe McManus, the detective. "I don't know what's happening. Probably nothing. Nothing for me to do, anyhow, except just sit here in case he shows up." Carpenter would have been shocked at how fast he was suspected of knowing something about Georgia's death.

Joe was talking to Mildred Lin-

den while he sat in comfort, sipping a drink, and Middie explored the living room with interest. They were in Cyril Carpenter's house, a medium-size brick and frame dwelling.

She was exceptionally attractive, like the rest of the thirty-odd police-women. Matrons not included. The chief was shrewd, and put as many on the payroll as he could get, for in many cases they achieved much better results than men. The standards were stiff. Middie was a U graduate, athletic and a fine swimmer, but no tomboy. If anything, she looked shy. Her figure was strictly girlish, rounded, slim; no matter whether she was wearing a swim suit or the tailored outfit she had on—a manish shirt, jacket, and skirt with inverted pleats. The skirt had a magical swing when she moved. Her lips were deceptively soft and kiss-expecting and she had soft, curly, shiny-clean black hair, and blue eyes so deep that they appeared black.

"I didn't know he was an artist," she remarked.

"That ain't art. Them's photographs," said McManus, murdering the language deliberately. His voice was Scotch. "How about dinner tonight? Maybe a show? Maybe some drinks? Or we could hunt up a bosky dell and just hold hands."

"By the way," she said insultingly, as though she hadn't heard him, "I didn't drop in to call on you. Here. The chief said I might as well bide a wee, as long as I come by here anyhow on my way home." She sailed him a folded, mimeographed sheet concerning the tightening up of certain departmental regulations.

"What an ugly temper," said McManus.

"What's the story on this, Joe?" she asked, facing him.

"Know where the old city dump is?"

She nodded. "Well," he said, "it seems as though the city let a contract to cover it with good fill and level it, plant trees and make it into a park."

"Is your name really Joe?" she asked curiously.

"No. It's Mack, but I dropped it, and they hung 'Joe' on me. When I said my name was Mack McManus people thought I was stuttering, which," he said judiciously, "is a handicap in getting a job."

"What has the city dump got to do with murder?"

"The old city dump," he corrected her gently.

"A purist." She was mildly awed. "You must have gone to school."

"And no murder yet."

"People like you get jobs like yours, and taxes go up."

"THEY were going to have a pool in the park, too, so that kids could wade and sail boats. Carpenter was Commissioner then. The new Commissioner thinks he rigged up a lease on the dump, pre-dated, and the city had to fork over on the let contract to the landscaping company. They think he got a piece of the forfeit money, too."

"Lease a dump?" she asked. "That's a new one."

"Not very. Somebody was smart. There's a shovel and truck and five men working there right now. The shovel fills the truck," he explained succinctly in his whiskey voice, "and the truck proceeds to a plant on the West Side near the new dump. The

truck empties. Men separate the junk and clean and salvage. The waste goes down a chute into another truck and gets emptied into the new City dump. Ring around the rosby."

"There must be a profit in it," she thought, aloud.

"Twenty to twenty-five thousand dollars a year, and enough stuff to keep the firm going for more than fifteen years, they estimate. The John Gogg Mining Company," he said sarcastically.

She was incredulous. "Ah, cain't hahdly believe it."

"You'd be surprised at what there is in a dump, lassie," he held forth. "They find paper money that people chuck into wastebaskets by accident; all kinds of coins, even a lot of gold pieces; pieces of jewelry; precious stones; scrap iron and copper and tin and brass and bronze. Antiques. Porcelain that costs like hell even if it's chipped, and glass, and darby picture frames of black walnut. And ebony and ivory. Gad, what people throw away when their wits are loose! Sometimes they come across bonanzas, like packs of letters with old stamps on them, that collectors want. They say they've even found some valuable paintings, one of them an oil on slate by Ingres, for sale down at the Spoh gallery now. The way those guys dig, it must be true that once they found a tin box that was busting with good paper money. Middletown is pretty old, lassie, year and years old, and that dump was practically a valley once."

"My daddy done told me that men who get voluble are trying to conceal the fact, the fact that they are after something."

"I can quote, too," he countered,

taking more of his drink. "'Women play with their beauty as boys with their knife, and cut themselves with it.'"

She regarded him suspiciously, and then laughed at him. She turned her back and looked at the pictures on the walls again.

"What boots it, with incessant care, to waste your wisdom in the desert air. Phooey," he said, and took another drink.

She heard him, and smiled with the humor of a mother looking at her child, but she said factually with her back turned, "You're right. These pictures are almost photographs in color."

"That's just about what I said."

"I'm just about agreeing with you, O'Connor."

"McManus. And 99 and 9/10ths Scotch. I always loved the stuff ever since I first smelled it."

"I wonder whether he copied these things from photographs."

"I," he said confidentially, "myself, considered the possibility of his using snapshots and a pantograph. I've looked around, but haven't found any horse of that color."

"There's something funny about these pictures."

"I do not find a trace of humor in any of them," he said with his whiskey drawl. "No talent. Correspondence-school stuff. In fact, I took the privilege of going through his desk, and it seems that he took a course in cartooning from a correspondence school while he was Commissioner. He's got a drawer full of lousy cartoons, and a heap of rejections from magazines and papers."

"There's something familiar

about these pictures," she insisted, puzzled. "I didn't mean that they were hilarious. They're odd. They are so detailed. The leaves in the trees are done one by one. This one called 'By the Shore' has a rock that looks exactly like granite, as though he took a slice of granite and glued it to the canvas."

MANY of the paintings were landscapes, and small, almost miniatures. All of them had the same photographic quality of rigid outline and exact coloring. There was no imagination involved. There were some figure drawings, indicating Carpenter's interest in the female anatomy. He had done a few ambitious jobs. One of them was a medium canvas about the size of an imperial sheet, entitled "The Deadly One."

She stared at it, and with a jolt recognized it as a self-portrait. In a jiffy she had to smile. The deadly one. That was what he considered himself to be. A lady-killer, to use an old term. The police department had a lot of things in its files, including the information that Carpenter was very fond of the lasses, and had nearly gotten into trouble on a couple of occasions.

His hobby was painting, but he couldn't make the grade; he wasn't good enough to commercialize it. He had a good sense of color, but instead of wasting so much time with brushes and pigments he might as well have taken color photographs of the same scenes. He copied nature, down to individual blades of grass, being unable to transfer a composition to canvas with anything but rules. His eye and mind were pho-

tographic, his pictures labored; he must have punished himself indefatigably, painting knotholes on lumber, a beetle on a canoe paddle, a catfish nestling itself round and round in a hollow in the river bank, and such things.

The picture that interested Mid-die had considerable mischief in it. It was a woodland scene, the painting entitled "The Deadly One." In the background were trees, one of which was hung with winding vines which were throttling it. In the middle ground was a man sitting on a rock, naked, staring toward the observer. He was painted a pale apple green, and was looking over his shoulder with a sidelong smile on his face. There was a mole on his left cheek under the eye, corresponding to the one Carpenter had. He had located it exactly, and even added the three black hairs that sprouted from it. Undoubtedly it was Carpenter himself. He painted everything down to the last annoying detail.

"Wonder if anyone posed for that," Middie said. "It reminds me of somebody I saw once. Kind of like my uncle."

"Wouldn't know," said Mack, and sounded as though he were brooding. "Memorize it if you want to. I won't stop you."

"Did Carpenter have a mole on his face?"

"A little brown one," Mack informed her, "It was shaped like a scallywag. You know—wriggly."

Now they were looking at each other, and looking hard.

"If you don't mind my saying so," said Mack, "I think you are very lovely and provocative. Very lovely.

In fact, you exhibit numerous aspects which I find most appealing." He was a little drunk. "I wouldn't have the nerve if I wasn't a trifle plastered, but how about a kiss? It's been on my mind since the first time I saw you. I'll flip a coin for it."

He plucked a half dollar from a handful of change and looked at her inquiringly.

"Well," she decided, "why not? The last kiss I had, as I remember it, was with a lad in a carryl in the stacks of the library at the U, and he was wearing horn-specked rimmales."

"I know that one," he said. "Rimhorned spectacles, really."

"In the first place, do you do a good kiss? The last one was about as exciting as an empty bottle after the liquor stores have closed."

"The way I do it gets censored by the Hays office."

"I'll find out. Flip your coin."

"Call it," he said, spinning the half-dollar with a snap of his thumb.

"Tails."

The coin glittered as it rose high in the air, almost to the ceiling, and fell. Mack caught it by slapping his hands together, and then whacked it down on the back of his left hand. He looked at it and put it back in his pocket.

He announced, "You lose."

"What was it?"

"Heads."

"Then it must have been tails before you slapped it on the back of your hand. So I win."

"No; you always do that when you spin a coin."

"All right, I'll take your word for it," she said without further dispute. "I never flipped any coins."



He swung her body back and forth in a wide arc before heaving her.

She walked directly to him and sat down beside him, smiled at him and said, "Well?"

He acted a trifle dazed, but abruptly passed his arm around her and kissed her on the mouth, kissed her so hard that their teeth met. She responded, pressing her breast against his chest.

It was quite a kiss, a long, searching one. But he was only human, and made passes. She disengaged

herself and got up.

"All I bet on was the kiss," she said.

Mack rubbed lipstick from his mouth with a handkerchief, and she walked to the door and departed without looking back. She let the door close, smiling to herself, the way women do.

CHAPTER III

Into It



IN HER car she headed for home automatically and almost reached it before she turned and made for the highway. She meant to pursue her idea, which in her smiling preoccupation she had temporarily forgotten.

On Highway 9 she drove north at a steady rate, keeping the speedometer needle at the speed limit. She was a good driver and never sliced her luck thin, had never had an accident through any fault of her own. The trouble was, she was a natural driver, and it got monotonous, like the greasy tea in the county jail; besides, she knew this route like the tailor's label inside her jacket collar. So she picked up a hitchhiker, so that she could have someone to talk with and pass the time.

This hiker was a young fellow about her age. The fine Italian hand of coincidence did its work, for it turned out that his destination was the same as hers—a place called Moose Lake. Except that he was going to the town and she was proceeding farther.

He was wearing a sport shirt, corduroy pants, and heavy shoes. When she first spotted him, he was

hiking right along with a bulging briefcase under his arm.

When she passed, he turned his head and looked at her, but didn't thumb a ride. She pulled in to the shoulder, anyhow, and stopped, calling back to him.

He ran to the car and got in. There was a law against picking up hikers and hitching rides, passed after a series of crimes.

"In front," she told the lad. She'd be a fool to take a chance on getting slugged from behind. If he pulled a gun, she thought she was expert enough in judo to take care of him.

"Thank you," he said, and that was all.

She smiled, appreciating his professionalism and good sense. He wasn't going to manufacture any conversation unless invited to. He merely sat with his briefcase on the floor between his shanks, his hands sleeping on his lap. He was a Swede, a big, rugged lad, with a handsome pelt of yellow hair and humorous eyes. The vent on top of the hood of the car was wide open for ventilation; now and then the breeze furlled her skirt above her knees and mechanically she would brush it down again; every time it happened, his eyes noticed, but he didn't move. Neither did she tuck her skirt under her knees to secure things, nor close the vent.

After a few miles she asked, "What's your name?"

"Borg, Miss."

"Then we're introduced. Where are you going? . . . All right. That would be a pretty long hike."

"It would take me most of the night," he admitted. "I've done it five times, in bad weather, but I gam-

ble on getting a lift most of the time."

"Do you live at Moose Lake?"

"Yes, Miss. I work there for Mittelfarr's Boat Company."

"What were you doing way down here? Not business?"

"The love business," he said candidly. "I go down to the city to see my girl when I get away, once a week."

"Why don't you get a job in the city, then?"

"I look around every time I go to Middletown, but there is nothing good enough yet. But I'm saving money from my yob—uh, job—and pretty soon I hope I can move to the city anyhow."

The wind whisked her skirt up while she was taking a sharp curve; she needed both hands, and had to leave things as they were for a few seconds. Borg couldn't help looking down, for the generous skirt was so upflung that he could see her garters. Little ribbons were attached to the garters, and fluttered.

There was a funny, simple look on his face, because he had discovered something new: garters are elastic, and so were her stockings, which they held up tight, to make her nether limbs smooth and a delight to the eye. It was fascinating, the way women dressed. In a way, their fashion was so foreign to common horse sense that it had to be interesting. Now, take the simplicity of style on the island of Bali. . . . On the other hand, modern clothing for men was sillier than anything yet.

THEY whirled out of the curve, and Borg raised his eyes. But not in time; she caught him at what

he was looking at, and for a while they stared blankly and idiotically at each other as though the car were standing still and there was no danger.

On the contrary, they were batting right along. Borg jerked his head, uttered a low yelp and grabbed the wheel with a large, sure hand. A farm lad, he; a horny-handed son of soil. They went skimming along the edge of the shoulder, which was steep. This was flat, swampy dairy land, and there was always water running in the ditch. He guided the car safely back into the lane they were using, telling her, "Keep your foot on the gas."

With the wheel in her hands again, she wondered why she had done that. Because she realized that she had taken her eyes from the road for so long. She had thought he was never going to wake up, and had been just about to return to the business of driving and nothing else. Probably she'd never see this kid again; he was decent; she was only enjoying her ability to tempt him, and it wasn't fair. All the same, provocation and ideas were in the wind, as though they were talking intimately of love with silences.

After negotiating another mile she asked, "Do you drink?"

"I chew a bit of gin off and on," he confessed. "Only kind of liquor I can afford. You use psychology and you convince yourself that you really like it."

"There's a bottle in the dash compartment. Not gin, though."

He swallowed and said, "That's very interesting, Miss."

"I'm not telling you what I've got. I'm asking you whether you want a

drink; and if you do, unscrew the cap and help yourself."

"Thank you very much; you just put it sort of indirectly and I didn't want to be—uh—forward." Before he finished speaking, he had the bottle out. It was a flat glass flask wired with silver, containing an amber liquor which he found to be marvelously potent.

He offered, "I'll hold the wheel if you'd like some."

"I think I would."

She closed her eyes and put the neck of the bottle to her lips, leaving lipstick on the glass. She noted that Bork drank again without wiping the neck. A gentleman. Then he had the lipstick on his mouth, as though he had been kissed.

THEY finished the bottle, a pint; she was pretty sure that she had had only two or three fifths of the flask, but a slumbering glow in her awakened to a hypnotic hum. Borg didn't appear to be affected at all, merely brushing against her when he bent over to tighten his shoelaces, knocked off ashes from his cigarette into the box, leaned against her when they rounded a curve, or shifted his briefcase so that the calves of their legs were pressed together. With her foot firm on the accelerator pedal she tried the muscles of her right leg, the one involved, and he responded promptly, doing the same thing and giving her a look after a while. Polite and inquiring.

He was so clean that he looked burnished, and she wondered if he was that way all over. There was color in his cheeks, and he was tanned a little, evenly from working in the slanting sun. She kept driving,

and the mixed forest of pine and oak and elm, towering maples and walnut swept by on both sides. There was a kind of compulsion in the weather. The day was warm and pleasant and humid, with cumulus clouds towering gigantically on the horizon.

"I'm hungry," she remarked all at once. "Wouldn't you like to eat something?"

"Thank you," he said politely, "but I'm not hungry, really."

"Well, I still am." She pulled in at the next roadside diner and said, "Outsy-daisy."

"Well, I'll just keep you company," he said reluctantly.

Abruptly she said, "You're flat broke, aren't you?"

"Pretty flat," he admitted, reddening. "All I've got is this luck piece." He showed her a mint Columbian half dollar.

He explained that his girl made him budget down to the last nickel, the sooner to hasten his moving to the city. Down and back he depended on swiping apples, berries, green peppers, or whatever was growing.

"Don't be embarrassed about it," she said impatiently when she footed his bill in the diner. "It's not my money. The bill goes on the expense account."

They had a couple of drinks, and then continued on their journey; she couldn't know it, but she had made the soundest of investments.

When they reached the outskirts of the summer colony, she inquired where he wanted to be dropped off. He said, "Do you know where the boat company is located? I better get off there to see what's cooking, account I'm late back this time. . . .

No, I won't get fired; I'm pretty solid."

She stopped the car there.

"I can't thank you enough," he said sincerely.

"Just say good-by," she suggested.

"Well, good-by, then," he told her, and moved to get out.

"No, I mean good-by," she murmured, drawling. She quirked one eyebrow so that its curve took on a provocative angle, and did something subtle with her lips so that there was no mistake about her waiting for a kiss.

"You don't mean that you want me to. . . ? Well, I," he said, confused. She looked at him, giving him an imperceptible nod.

He looked around. There were pedestrians and plant workmen in view, and people naturally kept glancing at the couple in the car. With a mental shrug he touched her tentatively, and now she moved toward him and definitely offered her lips.

So he put his arms around her, and she thought to herself—Holy gee whillikers, what hard muscles this man has got! The pressure of his chest flattened her breast, they were embracing so tightly even if they were in a twisted position. A knot of passers-by gathered along with workmen, watching with smiles. There were a couple of coarse jibes, but the offenders were silenced by cold stares. It was a long, sure-enough, masculine kiss that wasn't in the least awkward, and she met him halfway as it developed. Abruptly they ended the kiss, startled by the shriek of bad brakes and the blast of a horn, from a car just missing another one in traffic.

"Your girl in the city is lucky," she said.

"Thank you. Instead of evening up things with you somehow, I get a bonus. Now I can't repay you at all."

"Oh, maybe you can some time," she said. "Who knows?"

"Well. . . . Thanks; good-by," he said, and abruptly left the car, plowing straight through the little gathering of people, who good-naturedly applauded his lipstick-smearred mouth.

MIDDIE drove on through town and out of it on the ribbony asphalt road that girdled the big lake. It was a roller-coaster road, dipping, rising, flourishing down toward the lake and then up into the woods again.

Either it was the fine weather that made her feel so amorous today, or perhaps she had drunk a little more than usual. She thought back, and there wasn't anything she was sorry for. She hadn't done any harm, really; he was committed to his girl in the city, who would probably raise cain if he told her about the episode. But Middie would do the whole thing over again, and but more so. Because fun is fun, and rare nowadays.

As she drove toward the head of the lake, she realized that she was very thirsty. She had refilled her flask in the diner-bar, but the liquid that she wanted was cold water. Because she knew where there was a clear, cold mineral spring, she drove faster for a few minutes.

She slowed to idling speed and turned sharply down a twisting road toward the lake through the thick

oak woods that fringed it, and came out to stop on a cleared level from which she could see the diamond-bright glitter of the lake itself.

At the end of the clearing the bank went down steeply. To the left was what looked like a one-story house, but it was built down to the water's edge, or nearly, depending on whether the water level was higher or lower than normal. It was her house: the Wainwright house.

Agatha Wainwright was her aunt, and had left her almost nothing but the house. Middie couldn't afford to keep it up, and hadn't visited it for two years. No, it was three years.

Nevertheless, one of the disturbing impressions she had got from Carpenter's picture was that the painstakingly detailed background had seemed familiar to her. As though he had come here to do his work. She was following a screwy hunch. She had left it in the hands of real estate men, but she wanted a good price for it, too much at the time, because she felt sure that the neighborhood would develop; there was room for a town or municipality on this side of the big lake. There was a fine beach on her own property. Meanwhile, she had to get a job to pay bills.

She slammed the door of the car and strode down a hard path which threaded the trees and the outcroppings of rock. In a short distance she arrived in a hollow where there was a small, bubbling pool about five feet across in a shallow bowl of dark gray granite. The water had worn its way through the brim in the direction of the lake, and the stone was

rusty above the water level with iron oxide.

The water had the bite of cold and the iron in it. She knelt on her skirt to save the knees of her stockings, and drank until the roof of her mouth ached. She waited for the ache of the cold to go away, her eyes moist. The day suddenly turned to night, sprinkled with fireworks that died into the blackness like embers.

CHAPTER IV

Middle in the Middle



LIKE an animal, she was fighting with all her strength when consciousness returned, instinctively. Even before she opened her eyes.

Naturally, she had been slugged over the head from behind, and when she had time to think she would remember that for the briefest interval she had seen the blurred reflection of a man, in the pool from which she was drinking. It was the same man who was busy with her now.

She was on the floor of a boathouse of her own fairly large summer cottage, lying on a tarpaulin, where black John Gogg had carried her from the pool. The boathouse was really the basement of the house proper. Above was the main floor of the house, on a level with the highway or slightly above, and upstairs was a cluster of rooms, full-size, and a balcony with deck chairs for people to doze and dream across the water.

Between the boathouse and the water lay a sloping, pebbled beach about twenty feet wide. The garage-type doors were closed, but the side door leading up the path to the house



He caught her at the door
and swiped her the hard-
est blow she'd ever got.

was open. Just the same, the air was suffocating, with the sun beating on the house from the lake side.

There were two launches, one an old wreck she had left here, and the other gleaming with newness, resting on wheeled cradles, near her. When

the folding doors were opened, a boat could be let down the runway with a control cable and pulley arrangement, into the water, and be drawn back into the boathouse in the same manner. There was also a row-boat in a rack, along with a canoe whose canvas was in need of repair.

A lot of junk was lying around. There were nuts and bolts in cans, fishpoles and line, a cork target stuck with darts with rusty points, old inner tubes, a keg of rusty nails, pad-

dles leaning in corners, and a lot of empty bottles.

Middie was lying between the brand-new launch and a long tool-bench at the lone window. There were enough tools to equip a small hardware store. Power tools, some of them. Her Uncle Ned had liked to putter around, but before he was able to find out how skilled he was, he died. The protective coating of grease had helped the tools acquire a thick layer of dust. The boathouse itself was dusty and unused except for bringing the new speedboat in. The whole house was declining toward decay. The paint curled away from the wood in scabs, the weeds had taken over the dooryard of flowers, and the swimming-dock had rotted and toppled. A heavy rain and wind had pushed it high up on the beach.

There was a large FOR SALE sign in the dooryard and another one near the highway. The latter had been shredded by hunters for target practice. But the house was solidly built no matter how much it looked like a ruin.

Even while she was fighting she heard the gurgle and lapping and swish of water on the beach.

The first thing she did after she opened her eyes was to scream, "No!"

HE HAD hit her pretty hard over the head with a lean leather pouch filled with lead pellets. He carried her quickly to the boathouse. She was quite a weight—a hundred and eighteen pounds—and he had to mount a steep and uneven and straggling path, then descend. Gogg arrived at the boathouse, panting

with the strain, and wiped the sweat from his face.

He proceeded. He stripped off her dress, and then her slip. Thereupon she returned to consciousness and got up fighting blindly. He wrapped his arms around her, and they fell to the floor, each having tripped the other. She was on top and intended to escape through the open door. But of all things, Johnny Gogg made a wild grab and caught hold of her girdle. She sat down hard, and just then Cyril Carpenter stepped somberly through the doorway and waited with his fists on his hips.

He asked, "What the hell is going on, Goggie, my boy?"

"Oh, hello," said Goggie, getting up hurriedly. Thinking fast, he explained, "I was just fixing her so she wouldn't try to run away in a hurry."

"How do you mean?"

"With no clothes on she doesn't go hiking down any roads, nor does she cop a sneak in the woods through all the raspberry bushes and stuff. See?" Gogg asked brightly.

"A most ingenious idea," Cyril said coldly. "For a moment I thought you had some fell purpose in mind. But, ah, didn't it occur to you that she might whip into the lake and swim along shore till she could snatch clothes off someone's wash-line?"

"Hell of a long swim to the nearest cottage."

"Beside the point. What was the idea of jumping on her in the first place, you fool?"

"She's a police gal, damn it," said Gogg. "This car drove in, and I got a look at the number. It just happens that the Middletown cops have a special block of plates numbered

from 8001 on up, and hers is 8156. Take a look in her purse there. Her name is Mildred Linden and there's some papers saying she's a police-woman. I followed her down the path to the pool and bopped her while she was taking a drink."

"I wonder if you're a born idiot," said Cyril. "Think of what the cops would do to you if they knew what you were going to do to her."

"No cops are getting hold of me," said Gogg. "Look: Maybe she just stopped in for a drink and would have gone on, but I don't know. The cops certainly know you've got a cottage way down the lake, and I'll bet they're there now, the same as at your house down in the city. Because why hasn't there been anything in the papers about the Brooke murder? They're keeping quiet to give you the jitters."

"Shut up!" Cyril bellowed. Then he growled, "Now you've done it. They never could have proved whether she fell or was pushed."

"Okay, okay," Gogg said irritably. "You're in over your head anyhow. You'd get sent up on that crooked park deal. That Brooke dame wasn't working all on her own, you can bet your last dime. And now the cops are doing a routine turn around the lake. See?"

"I know this country like the engraving on a ten spot," he said. "If any more of them come after this lass, you know what the plans are. They'll never find us."

"You better stick around the house then, till we see what's cooking. Where were you, fishing again in that hollow down the shore?"

"Well, I wouldn't be out in the launch," he snapped.

"So you didn't catch anything again."

WHILE the conversation went on, he kept staring with appreciation at Middie. There was something especially fascinating about her minimum of dress, enhancing her shapeliness.

Middie was amazed, staring wide-eyed and standing pressed against the wall farthest from the door. Here it was, the whole story handed to her, for all the good it might do her.

"And now what happens, gentlemen?" she asked, and was glad that her voice was even. She was trying to keep the tremor out of her legs.

"I suppose you just dropped in for a drink," said Cyril.

"Certainly. The house was closed up, but I thought there would be a pump."

"See, Goggie, my lad?" Carpenter asked.

He had chosen the house just because he did know that it had been closed up ever since old lady Agatha Wainwright died. He ordered Gogg to one side, saying, "Keep your gun handy, lad. I understand that these lassies are taught jujitsu."

"I think you'd better let me go, and take your chances on getting away," she advised. "The boys will be coming around the lake hunting for me when I don't show up."

"They won't find you here, or us either," he assured her. "Your car? There's a bed of muck on the other side of the point, that hasn't got any bottom. Your car goes into it."

"What are you going to do?" She was alarmed, because he was slowly approaching her.

"This is a temporary arrangement," he said evasively, giving the grinning Gogg a look.

There was a spike in a post, and from it he took a set of heavy, rusty old manacles. He snapped one bracelet around her wrist and the other around a pipe fitting. Angrily she let fly at him with her foot, hoping to catch him with her high heel. But he jumped clear, swinging his arm defensively at the same time. The swing was a swat, impacting her on the bare waist. The slap of his big hand was as loud and sharp as the springing of a trap. It was so hard that on the solar plexus it would have paralyzed her diaphragm.

Cyril looked ugly. In a curious, old-fashioned way he said, "That will keep you available for a little while, Missie. Go ahead and scream all you want to. This is the most remote part of the lake, and no one will hear you.

"Come along, Goggie. One of us has to dispose of her car, and I think it will be you."

"Where will you be?" Gogg asked.

"Up in the cupola, keeping a lookout," said Cyril. "I'm not taking any chances now."

"I believe you, at that," said Gogg, grinning.

They went to the door, where Gogg turned to give Middie a long, lippy leer. Finally she turned her back to him, and he commented, "Hmn. That's even more interesting. Where did you get all them there dandy curves, Middie?"

IN A FEW seconds she heard his feet grit on the sidewalk and she was alone. She turned around and

looked through the doorway, listening. First she heard footsteps upstairs, then her car starting. Then there wasn't any sound except for the sleepy lapping of water on the beach, and an excited crow tearing off stridors about something or other in the woods below. She wondered whether crows really could talk like parrots if you slit their tongues. It seemed a cruel thing to do to any creature, like perforating a bull's nose for a ring.

Looking down past her breast, she saw the scarlet imprint of Cyril's hand. Four fingers and most of the palm showed as welts on her white waist. It was a wonder that she hadn't received a broken rib.

From her soft lips, as she examined her predicament, issued a four-letter cussword that would have shocked the wig off her beloved aunt. Her situation was not so good. The manacles chained her right wrist to a rigid piece of plumbing. This was an intake pipe that ran a distance out into the lake. The pipe entered the boathouse, then elbowed up vertically to connect with the water pump, the lake water being used for ordinary purposes in the house. She was manacled to the upright. If she got tired, she could sit down on the horizontal section. But it was infuriating to be hampered like this, and she could hardly think through the fog of her anger and fear.

The rusty handcuffs were her own. She had obtained them from the Moose Lake sheriff, and used to practice opening them, picking the locks, when she was up here studying, and after she got tired of reading papers, boning up to pass her police examinations. She had suc-

ceeded in opening the cuffs only once. And it would be one sweet job now. If.

But she knew where everything was, knew that there was a .22 rifle on the mantel in the long living room upstairs; she knew about a box of fishhooks which had been shoved away on top of the cellar foundation. One might be used as a picklock . . . if she could get to them.

After a long while she heard Gogg returning, and she thought, "Well, there's my car going down, down to the bottom of that lake of muck. It was a good car with a good motor, and I paid for it myself. Damn, damn."

She wondered why she hadn't mentioned to anyone that she was driving up here. She had been so close to home that she could have left word there that she was going on this ride. It was certainly too late now.

Gogg stood in the doorway, and the expression in his eyes made her so furious that she could have killed him, just because he was what he was. Little John Gogg, tough and sinewy, swarthy, about the same height as her own, dapper. Slick hair, shiny brown eyes and long lashes. He reminded her of some Hollywood character whose name she couldn't remember. He was a gangster-picture type, and he used perfume. The scent was in the air of the boathouse, and she identified it as a well-known, exotic woman's perfume. Expensive.

"Why don't you take a bath once in a while instead of spraying yourself with that junk?" she inquired. "You stink."

He wasn't taken aback, and grinned, showing even white teeth, as

square as though they had been filed. "You'll stink, too, in a few days or weeks. People always do when they're dead. Some other things come first in your case, and the hell with Carpenter."

He moved around the pair of launches to see her better. He looked her over appraisingly, and the light in his eyes was pure wickedness as he went closer, one soundless step at a time.

NARROWLY she watched him come near. She was frightened more than she had ever been before, and there was very little that she could do to defend herself. When he was quite close he made a grab for her free arm, and missed because she was quicker. She kicked out savagely, striking him in the hip with her heel, and both of them came close to falling down.

He was hurt, and held the place, but all at once forgot his madness and the big, aching bruise he was going to wear. Stumbling as he turned, he hurried around the two boats and beat it through the doorway to sit on the slope of weedy grass there. Because the clumping footsteps of Cyril Carpenter were crossing the living room above, on the way to the boathouse stairs.

Gogg had lighted a cigarette. He turned his head and rose when Carpenter started down the wooden stairs. Both men went back up, talking, and she heard part of their conversation. It was very, very, runny. Carpenter had seen Gogg returning on foot to the house, and investigated when he didn't appear at once. Gogg said he had looked in to see if there.

They didn't trust each other, the prisoner was all right and still because Cyril started talking about the "Mine." The city dump contract. Very crooked.

"I heard that a bundle of papers or documents turned up in The Heap," said Carpenter. "I never saw them. What were they? Do you know?"

"I've got a hunch they were government bonds," said Gogg easily. "I heard it, too. Somebody must have swiped them. You can do two things—fire the whole outfit at the dump and the plant, and hire new men, or try to find who swiped that bundle."

"I think I know who got the bundle," Cyril said carefully, and he wasn't looking at Gogg. "But I'm in a hell of a position to fire or hire anybody. As soon as I show myself anywhere . . ."

Their voices faded, and she was alone again.

It grew dark, and the lake looked like dull silver with ripples traveling across it. The door had been left open.

Through the door she could see a rectangle of the outdoors. In the last of the twilight, she watched a squirrel steal down the slope of grass, not jumping, but flowing like a liquid length of fur. The red-gray fox squirrel found the buried nut it was looking for, dug it up and ate it. The nut had a green shoot; the squirrel ate the luscious shoot first, enjoying every nibble.

Both men came down to the boat-house when it was dark. Middie was sitting on the pipe now, and she was able to close both hands on it in the blackness.

CHAPTER V

Trial and Error



THE bright flashlight entered, and she kept her eyes open as little as possible. In with the light, the men tramping around the boats, came some equipment. They had a thick plumber's candle that would last for an entire day, and a thick quilt folded in half for her to lie on. She got a pack of cigarettes of a brand that she didn't like, but she smoked one anyhow.

After they had gone, she looked at a plate they had left on the floor. It held two big sandwiches, a set of shakers of salt, pepper, and paprika, potato salad, glass of milk, and cold cuts of salami, liverwurst, and country sausage.

For a long while she looked at the meal with contempt, the clumsy sandwiches and delicatessen stuff. Finally she peeled the rind from a piece of liverwurst, and before long had eaten everything. She even drank the glass of cold milk, and she hated milk, the pasteurized taste anyhow.

Going to bed was awkward. She kept jerking and clanking the handcuffs, but eventually made herself fairly comfortable on the doubled blanket. It was too warm to get inside it. She left the candle burning, and for a long while stared at the pointed, motionless flame.

It was a hypnotic thing to watch, as though it were an eye with wisdom behind it. At least there was this much knowledge: They could not afford and were not going to let her go. Not now. Either they had not made up their minds about the best way of disposing of her, or planned

to make passes at her first. There were two of them, a lucky thing as long as each kept check on the other. But what if they started flipping coins, or simply decided to take turns? She shuddered. They hadn't given her back her clothes, which were out of the farthest reach of her foot.

What a damned fool she had been, not to be on guard from the moment she reached the town. The trouble was, she hadn't had any real faith in her hunch about where Carpenter was hiding out. And now here she was, handcuffed to a pipe in a boathouse. It was a lesson learned too late—if you were going to operate on hunch, you had to operate on it all the way through to its conclusion or not at all.

She awakened abruptly, having fallen asleep; she moved convulsively and nearly screamed, dreaming that a monster had seized her by the wrist. For an instant she didn't know where she was. In her sleep she had tried to turn over, and of course jerked at the manacles.

There was not a sound from above. Both men were dead to the world. Since they weren't taking turns on guard, they must have rigged up some device to give them warning of danger.

And when she awakened again there was pale light in the doorway. A fish jumped out of the lake after a fly and made a big splash quite near shore, and pretty soon the birds started chirping and beeping as though they'd gone nuts.

Well, she was still alive.

SHE found some hairpins that had dropped out; without thinking,

She arose from her drink of water, and he hit her with a loaded leather pouch.



she fixed her hair as well as she could with her fingers and inserted the pins again. Still no sound from upstairs. A glance at her watch told that it was pretty early yet. She wound the watch, and the clicking of the operation sounded loud.

What a marvelous invention the watch was. Everything fitting just so, and the escapement ticking almost inaudibly, for years if the timepiece was kept in good condition. You had to have the know-how, a keen eye and sure hand, to take a timepiece apart and put it together again.

Escapement. There was a pleasing word.

She thought of Victor Hugo and a device he used in a tale. This was a sou-pièce, divided heads and tails with infinite pains and hollowed, and fashioned so that the halves screwed together to meet with an invisible joint. In this ingenious container was concealed a watchspring, which, if used properly with the same infinite patience, could saw through iron bars.

It was just a thought, but it caused her to reexamine her prison.

The pipe to which she was cuffed came up through the floor near the lakefront doors, right-angled along the floor to a tank and pumping machinery, where it rose again to its connection with the apparatus. There was a shut-off valve near the joint where the pipe entered the house.

She made her way down to it, the bracelet riding with a metallic whir against the pipe, and got down to scrutinize the valve. She knew that there were right- and left-hand threads; she could see the unused threading on the pipe, and this valve had been installed after the pipe was put in. The plumbers had simply sawed out a section of pipe, threaded the ends, and twirled the valve on tight. They must have intended the job to last for keeps; she gripped the pipe with one hand and shoved on the upright valve wheel with the other with all the strength and leverage she had, and couldn't budge it. It was rusted or sealed fast, or just plain jammed. Damn men anyhow. . . .

But in this corner some gardening tools were stacked, and among them

was an axe with a stout handle of ash or hickory. She could just reach it. After a little experimenting, she got the blade of the axe hooked under the intake pipe, with the wood against the brass stem of the valve under the wheel. Then, with one ankle and heel hooked around the pipe and the other leg braced, she tried all her weight and might on the long helve.

The handle hurt her ribs, but she kept throwing herself against it in jolts until there was a gnashing creak of metal and the valve tilted over a full ninety degrees. The wheel of the valve just cleared the floor as she pulled it around under. It turned more and more easily, with only the whisper of metal threads rubbing, until there was a snap when a pipe-end was loose and jumped a couple of inches, quivering.

She slipped the bracelet off the end of the pipe and got up breathing hard with excitement.

She started for her clothes, but this would take her farthest from the door and she wouldn't make it in time without being seen. Because footsteps were moving overhead, toward the boathouse stairs. So with her shoes in her hand, running in her stocking feet, she made a dash for the open door. She intended to make for the woods, then the lake, and swim and wade the long distance to the first cottages, where she could get or steal clothes.

She popped through the doorway, flying down the slope toward the nearest patch of woods; she was looking over her shoulder, and there was Carpenter just emerging from the house. He stood still on the landing at the head of the stairs, gap-

ing at her. She could outrun that old goat any day in the week except Thursday, but unfortunately this was the day of Thurs.

COMING swiftly around the beach side of the house was John Gogg. He was dressed as though for a morning swim, and was dressed in swim trunks, sandals, and a silk robe. The robe was flapping and flying out behind him as he sprinted to cut across Middie's line of escape. She tried to outdodge him as they got closer and closer. Dropping her shoes, she cut at him desperately with the dangling handcuff. It grazed his skull but didn't stun him, and he dived at her midsection in a powerful tackle. Both went to the ground headlong, tangling, rolling over and over.

Watching from the stair landing, Carpenter turned and went back into the house. He returned with a .22 rifle and held it ready and aimed, looking down the barrel and moving to follow the scrambling figures. He could have picked off Middie easily.

Wild with frustration, she swore tautly at Gogg and fought with all the tricks she knew. She succeeded in throwing him aside once with a judo hold, but he recaptured her immediately and they went on wrestling.

Three claw marks streaked down his cheek and began to bleed, and then she bit the first piece of anatomy handy, his upper arm. Her teeth went through the silk robe and sank into his muscular flesh; he let out a holler of pain as he ripped himself loose. But as he did so, he grabbed and caught the manacle that was swinging free from her wrist.

The jerk he gave her wrenched the socket of her arm and spun her around. He caught her before she fell, and marched her up the slope toward the house. The links of the handcuffs pressed into her left shoulder, with her right arm doubled up tight in front of her. He had snagged her left wrist, and doubled that arm up behind her, high up, hurting her, so that she was being forced to bend forward and backward at the same time. She uttered mewling sounds of pain.

He was hurt, too, with blood flowing down the sleeve of his robe, but she couldn't even see through the tears in her eyes. It felt as though he were trying to break her arms or at least dislocate a few joints.

"Knee me, will you!" he said savagely, and gave her a brutal thrust from behind.

Carpenter descended the stairs and said, "Now we'll find out how she got loose." He looked at Gogg as though he was suspicious, which he was. He had heard Gogg wakening, to put on the sandals, robe, and trunks. But then, instead of taking the path to the beach, Gogg sneaked around the house toward the boat-house door. As soon as he saw that from the upper window, Carpenter whipped into trunks and robe himself and hurried downstairs, pretty certain of the find-out.

THEY entered the boathouse and walked around the pair of launches, coming in sight of the electric pump. Carpenter looked at the sprung pipe and the ax and remarked, "Very ingenious." It was a favorite word of his. "You won't get away this time, Lassie." He

unlocked the handcuff and started to snap it around a heavy iron ring in the back wall. There was a pulley wheel dangling, the fixture being used for hauling the heavy launches out of the lake.

"Wait a minute," she said. "I'm all dirty and I'd like to wash up." She showed the palms of her hands, and they were grimed.

After hesitating, Carpenter said, "All right."

They led her through the doorway and upstairs to the main level of the house. At the stair-head she filled her lungs and screamed with all her might, hoping the sound would carry across the water. Gogg roughed her and pushed her into the house. He asked, "What do you think?"

"Nothing," Carpenter answered. "The way this place is laid out, sounds gets smothered. Nobody can hear her any more than I can hear a bluejay reciting poetry."

They led her through the living room and up bare oak stairs to the bathroom and ushered her in. She closed the door on them and locked it.

But there was no escape from here, which they knew. The window was large enough to let her out, but it was barred by a double screen of copper mesh and heavy wire to keep out squirrels, beetles, birds, and marauders. She turned water on, and sat down on the edge of the bathtub for a while to think.

There wasn't any solution. She was stuck. With a peculiarly masculine gesture, planting her hands on her knees, she got up and went through her complete toilet. She combed out her hair thoroughly, getting bits of grass in the comb, and

pinned it in shape, taking her time.

The men waiting outside thought she was letting the water run to cover any noise she was making in trying to escape.

Gogg yelled, "What are you doing in there?"

"None of your business," she answered. But she turned the faucet off. If they had their ears stuck to the door they could wait till doomsday for sounds; she refused to hurry. One of them ran downstairs and outside to keep watch on the bathroom window, suspicious.

At leisure, she took a shower meticulously, soaping every square inch of epidermis she had. She turned around and around, wiping the soap off with her hands under the shower; after she had dried herself with a clean towel she found some talc in a cabinet and dusted herself. Because it was lake water she had used, and she bore a faint odor of the lake.

Then she found a toothbrush in an unopened box of spares, and brushed her teeth. In the wash-bowl she laundered her brassiere, panties, and stockings, squeezed them out and hung them over the shower-rod to dry. Then she sat on the edge of the tub, her elbows on her knees and her cheeks in her palms.

Both men were at the door again, and they got impatient.

"Come out of there!" Gogg ordered. "What're you doing?"

"I washed my things, and I'm waiting for them to dry," she said mildly.

"Put them back on wet," he said, "or else no breakfast. I'm gonna count. One, two, three. . . ."



"How high are you going to count?"

"Ten. I'll start over again. One, two, three . . ."

"I can't get wet things on that fast," she protested.

He counted more and more slowly while she got into the wet underthings. He interrupted his count, threatening to break the door down. The stockings were only dampish, being fine nylon and fast drying. At the count of ten she unlocked the door just as he was getting set to take a running jump at it and give

She woke up fighting blindly to escape; but he caught her again and she sat down suddenly.

it his shoulder. He meant business. They took her back down to the boathouse, and Carpenter snapped the handcuff through the iron ring.

CHAPTER VI

The Gun Was Loaded



HEY didn't leave immediately, but turned and stared at her from a distance of a dozen feet. Intently they looked at her wet underthings and what they contained, then dropped their attention to her long, rounded legs. This girl was a honey. She couldn't do anything but look back. As though they had caught each other at thinking of the same thing, the two men jerked their heads, glanced at each other and went outside.

They went down to the secluded beach and had a swim. She could hear them splashing, and she longed to be in the water on a day like this. Perhaps she would be, but wouldn't know anything about it. Quite true. The Wainwright place was quite isolated, since the property included the whole point that stuck out down the beach a way, and no one would come looking for her. She hadn't told a soul where she was going.

They were still working things out in their minds, though they'd had time enough, she thought. They weren't of one mind on murdering her, though they had to do it eventually after having their way with her. She didn't think that Carpenter had ever killed anyone, but she was pretty sure that Gogg had, from the way he handled a revolver.

There was jealousy between the two men. And Carpenter was wor-

ried about seeing no mention of the Brooke girl's death in the papers. Now he was worried about where he could tell the cops he had been if they questioned him. No doubt, too, the men were polishing off the details.

Whether to shoot her and bury her; forcibly drown her to make it look like an accident; strip her and take her across the lake in the launch after bashing her head in, and pitch her into the drink off the end of someone's dock. They'd find a dock with a stone anchor on the end of it, and yank that into the water. It would look as though she had gone swimming in the altogether, dived, come up, grabbed the nearest thing, the anchor rope, upset the stone and brained herself in the water.

She could imagine plenty of avenues which all led to death, and not one to escape. She rattled the manacles.

This was perfectly weird, she thought. They were going to shoot her, or strangle or stab, starve or bludgeon, and while they were thinking about having fun with her they were cavorting in the lake's clean H₂O.

They had their swim and bath and came tracking up the circuitous path to the house. They passed, glancing in. Carpenter's gray hair was plastered to his skull, and it was obvious now that he was balding. If he lived five years longer he would have a shiny dome. Gogg's hair was so oily that it wasn't much disarranged.

THE sun was up now, and she could feel heat stealing into the boathouse. There was hardly any breeze today, and the water of the

lake scarcely wrinkled. There were few boats out, no launches. Too early. The fishermen were asleep, hangoverish, disgusted, or e'en murmuring about catching a muskellunge, or giant catfish, to the disinterested girl lying on the clean sheet and blinking sleepily, in one of the swarming cabins down the lake.

Gogg and Carpenter rambled upstairs and went into the kitchen, starting the oven. There was an explosion of impatience from Carpenter. He said, "Damn it, I told you not to do that!"

Middie could hear them distinctly.

Gogg had thrown some bacon into a sizzling-hot frying pan, and the grease had shot like needle-points and stung them both.

"I said something," said Carpenter, glaring. "Why don't you say something?"

"How'd you like to wear this hot frying pan on top of your bean, right now?"

"I've got gray hair, but by Jerry I can still pull your nose out and tie it in a knot. I'd like to do it."

"Go ahead and try it. I'll shoot off your big toes," said Gogg calmly. "With my wee rewolver."

"It happens that I'm hungry," Cyril said, "and I'd just as soon take over. Let me fry that bacon."

"Go ahead and take over. Do you think I like the job? I'm so full of bacon I dream of pigs frying human beings. Why don't you catch some fish? There's plenty of them in the lake; I hear them splashing every morning, and I look out the window and I can see them jumping out of the water."

"Try catching them inshore," Carpenter said sourly. "I caught

that pike a couple of days ago, didn't I?"

"One meal," said Gogg.

There was an interval of silence while they ate, and then they came down with her breakfast—a large plate of ham and eggs, buttered toast, glass of milk, and small glass of tomato juice. They even gave her a second cup of coffee, and then she was alone again. She was pretty sure that she wouldn't be disturbed for a while; she let a little time go by while she listened to the men move around upstairs, and then she went to work.

SHE reached up and managed to get hold of the dusty cigar-box that had been put away on top of the cellar foundation, between a couple of rafters. It was exactly as she had left it. Inside the box were odds and ends of fishing tackle. Included with the junk was a large cork stuck full of fishhooks. She selected one of the slender, barbed hooks, and probed with it in the keyhole of the left handcuff.

She worked patiently at the lock for a long time, perhaps forty minutes, with more hope than any real expectation of success. It had been hard enough when the nippers were new. Now rust stained her fingers, and the dry scratching and picking of the hook in the lock got on her nerves. For five minutes she smoked a cigarette from the pack they had left, and then returned to the task of picking the lock.

At intervals she quit to have another cigarette. Once she snapped the barb from the hook, but was able to shake the bit of metal from the lock. Using a duplicate hook she

proceeded, twisting the point, catching it on obstructions inside, trying to solve the mystery of the lock's mechanism. Her fingers were sensitive, and got sore from the continual pressure. It was inevitable that she would harpoon herself a number of times with the point of the hook.

The morning lazed along. She had scratches and jabs on her fingers, and a gash in her palm where she had driven the hook into her flesh past the barb and had to jerk it out by force. The accident sickened her, and she wondered vaguely about blood poisoning; at the same time, she marveled at how tough human flesh was. Pulling the hook out was a job because she couldn't get any grip on the shank with her slippery fingers. She used a shred of waste, and even though the hook was slim it took a lot of strength to straighten it out. That was what happened before the barb tore loose. For a while she had to hold a ball of waste to absorb the blood.

The straight hook was much easier to work with—like getting the meat out of a tough nut with a nut-pick.

She thought to herself, It's a lie that a hairpin is a universal implement and can open locks. For a while she explored with a hairpin, and it just bent. So she went back to the fishhook.

She smoked five cigarettes; blood oozing from a cut stuck the last one to her fingers, so she didn't finish it, stepping on it and pulling her finger away with a grimace. By this time she had rediscovered a lot about the lock, as though she could see most of the stubborn thing's insides. But it wouldn't open. A dozen times she

thought she had it solved, and was always disappointed. No doubt the lock could be picked by an expert, but there was a detail or two about its construction that baffled her. When it clicked open, she stared, because she hadn't done anything.

She had been sitting on her heels, and had thrust the straightened-out fishhook into the keyhole to try once more. Her muscles ached, and in shifting to a more comfortable position she lost her balance. In regaining it she pulled on the manacles, and the lock she had been working on snapped open. She was free. For all she knew it might have been open for the past five minutes or half hour, and involuntarily she uttered a soft, brief laugh. It was just that the hinge was stiff.

ONLY intuition could have warned her. The manacles still dangled from her right wrist, and she put that arm back of her out of sight. Sitting down, she looked as she had before, handcuffed to the ring. She hadn't seen anything nor heard a sound. But a soundless bell of warning had rung in her mind, and she continued waiting for something to happen.

Nothing did; she shrugged and was about to reach for another cigarette when Gogg framed himself in the doorway.

He was happy about something, smiling as he came in. He had a proposition, and he went ahead and propositioned: "How's about us going down to the inlet and having a swim, little girl? Cyril won't mind. He won't know. He's drunk. Drinking in the morning, of all things," he clucked.

"I've just had a bath, thanks," she refused shortly.

"Aw, come on," he insisted, with a shine of pure wickedness in his eyes. "The way you look at me, you must think I eat little girls. You won't get hurt if you're good, and that's a promise."

"Cross your heart black and blue, I suppose," she said sarcastically. "Go to hell, Mister."

"Look," he bargained. "I bet we could make some kind of a deal. Let's go down to the inlet and talk over things. I'll bring a bottle along."

"Spiked with knockout drops, I'll bet. I sort of remember coming across guys like you before. You're the kind of masher we pick up in theatres."

"Ah, you're all wrong about that," he said sardonically.

He had stepped close to her as though he thought he was stalking wild game, and now he laid rough hands on her. She knew what he had in mind, and what his method would be wasn't important. Probably he meant to knock her cold expertly with his fist and then do plenty of molesting.

This time she didn't take any chances on swinging at him with the free handcuff. Literally, she jumped the gun, for he was carrying one in a shoulder harness. He had seized her by the left wrist, thinking that her right hand was anchored. She twisted, and not only hit him in the face with the manacles but relieved him of his gun as well. It went off, and he collapsed bonelessly with a look of horrified surprise on his ugly puss.

She jumped, surprised and deaf-

ened by the concussion. For she only intended to wing him at most, never having shot anyone before. But the action of the gun was so gentle, or her grip so convulsive, that the damned thing just went off.

While she stared down at the dead man his eyes slowly closed. Before she had time to gather her wits, Cyril called in a furious voice from the doorway, "Gogg, come on out here."

Middie ducked down out of sight beside the nearest launch, when Cyril said again, "Listen, Goggie, my lad. We can't afford to monkey around like this. If you want the girl so much, she's yours; I'm not fooling."

"Use your head. Suppose I had drunk that mickey you slipped me, and was out cold when the cops came and you were down here. Would have been hell to pay. Don't you think I know when there's chloral in a drink? Hell, I've handed out a few mickeys in my time myself. Come on out. Damn it, I just heard a shot, and there's somebody in the woods near the house."

What happened next was very comical.

CHAPTER VII

Dead Man's Buff



MIDDIE was crouched on the floor where she could look under the launches, which were put up on wheeled cradles. She arrived at this position just as Cyril did. There wasn't much space to look through, but it sufficed. Mutually surprised, they just stared at each other for an instant.

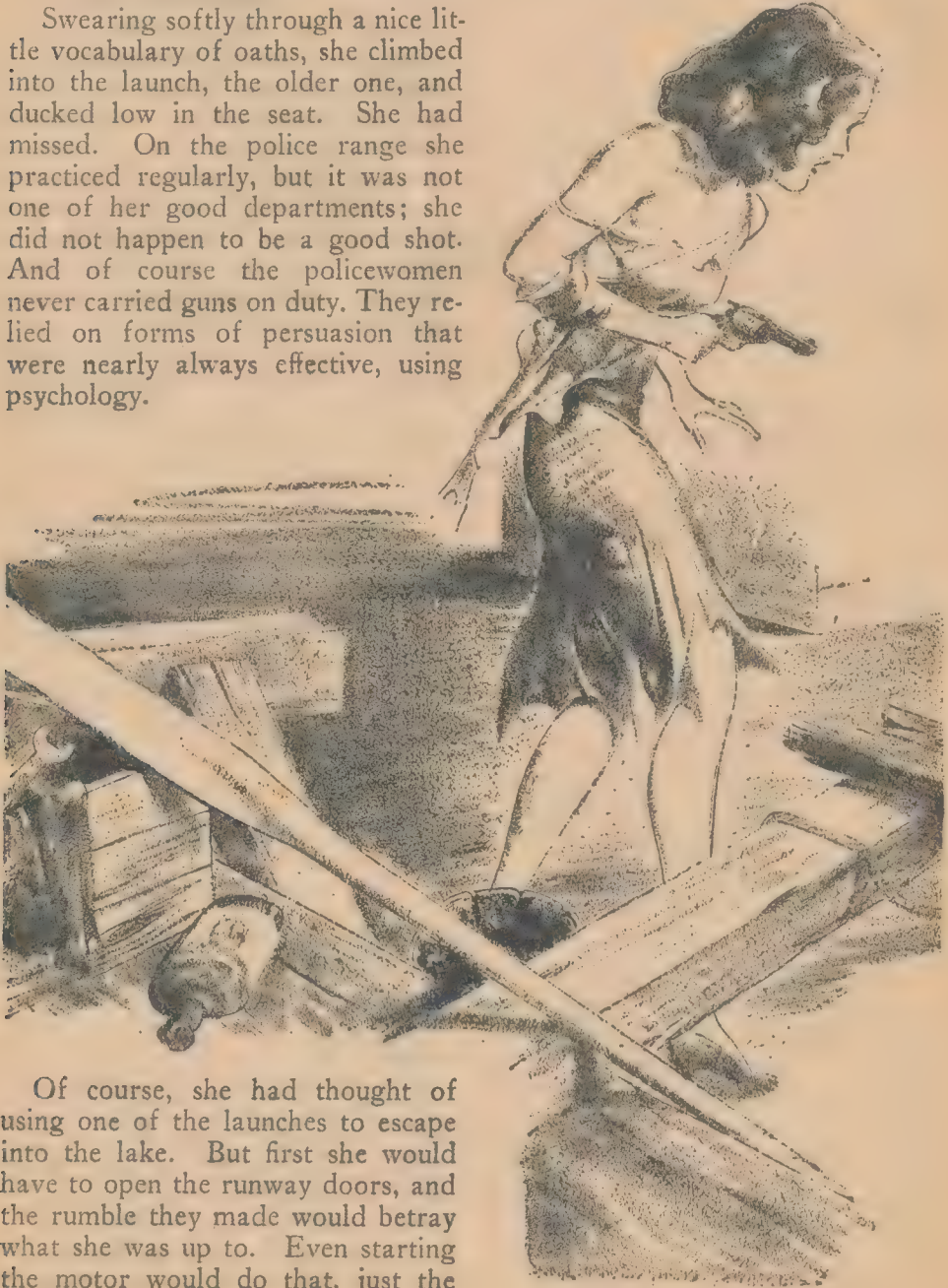
Cyril saw the dead Gogg and was aiming in Middie's direction with the

.22 rifle. Recovering first, she fired desperately.

Hollering with surprise and alarm, Cyril disappeared from sight in a frantic scramble.

Swearing softly through a nice little vocabulary of oaths, she climbed into the launch, the older one, and ducked low in the seat. She had missed. On the police range she practiced regularly, but it was not one of her good departments; she did not happen to be a good shot. And of course the policewomen never carried guns on duty. They relied on forms of persuasion that were nearly always effective, using psychology.

grinding of the starter. And once she was in the water, if she ever got that far, she would be an easy target for a repeating rifle while the screw



Of course, she had thought of using one of the launches to escape into the lake. But first she would have to open the runway doors, and the rumble they made would betray what she was up to. Even starting the motor would do that, just the

was getting a bite into the water.

On the other hand, Carpenter was stymied. Her car had been destroyed, so now he could only get away on foot or in a launch, and he

A hairy arm looped under his chin. A voice exclaimed:
"The lady said drop
that gun!"



couldn't get to the boats until the duel was over.

It was a duel.

The window to the left shattered as he jammed the barrel of the rifle through it and fired at the spot where she had been. The glass was dusty, and he must have mistaken Gogg's shape for herself, because a small hole appeared in his chest next to the one she had made, the latter seeping a little blood now. Promptly she

fired at the window, but only sprinkled him with glass.

He wasn't hurt; he simply cursed and went on the prowl again. It became a game of outguessing. He might sneak around to the door again, or he might decide that would be her figuring and try potting her at the window again.

Anyhow, a .22 long would penetrate the side of the boat, so she hustled over the side. It was a prob-

lem what to do, the boathouse being somewhat scant of hiding places. With little choice, she ran lightly around the rear of the boats and stood in the corner, where she could watch both the door and window.

She was outguessed, because he didn't use either. He presumed she would stay away from the door, because if she made a dash through it, he would surely get her. What he did was slip around to the beach side and fire through the closed runway doors twice. She heard the bullets smack into the back wall. But that was on the other side, where the pump was. She fired quickly, herself, and came close to where he was, outside. The revolver was a .38, and the bang of it in the closeness made her ears ring. Her wrist was aching with strain, just from this little while of tension, and she felt shaky in the legs.

She debated trying a dash through the doorway, when there was a loud snap near her head. He was guessing closer, and had fired through the side wall. One large splinter stuck out from the raw board a few inches in front of her. She didn't waste any time staring at it, but fired back through the wall.

HIS plan was all right: by crisscrossing his fire he was bound to get her eventually; he had plenty of ammunition. He fired through the wall again farther down, as though he thought she were in the opposite corner, but she didn't answer. Horrified, she realized that she was being drawn into a trap; he was making her use up her ammunition. She looked into the cylinder of the revolver, and all the bullets had been ex-

pected but one. One shot left. When that was fired he could simply walk in and do as he pleased.

She stole back to the pump and got down on the floor behind Johnny Gogg. Here, if he happened to sight her from the doorway, she would have the benefit of the body as a barricade. From the window he couldn't see her, the toolbench being in the way. For herself, she wasn't going to use the last cartridge until she got a good look at him, which would be through the doorway.

So she kept the gun sighted toward the opening, her heart and breathing accelerated.

Nothing happened for a long while. This was a new tactic, keeping her waiting, guessing where he was going to be next, or more likely *if* he was. He might be playing dead, waiting for her to take a chance on skipping through the doorway into the wide open places, where he could bring her down like a clay pigeon. She smiled condescendingly, with slim chance of her falling for such an obvious trick. That old chestnut had a beard on it.

But she didn't know what an old devil Carpenter was. He had hiked along the beach, come up behind the ruined dock; and he wormed his way up the slope on the grass, keeping a bush between himself and the open doorway. He lay there on his stomach and waited, thinking her thoughts for her as time passed, his yellowish teeth bared while he shook with occasional spasms of soundless chuckling.

"She's thinking I'm playing a trick on her," he thought. "I'm not dead at all, just playing possum and waiting for her to show herself. I know

how to wait. . . . Maybe I'm dead after all, or possibly I've gone off on foot." A long while passed. "Now I'm dead, now I'm not; now I'm dead, now I'm not."

Like pulling petals from a daisy.

"I wonder how she got the gun from that skunk of a Gogg. He must have unlocked the cuffs for reasons of his own, and she was too quick for him and gave it to him. Got too close to her."

He didn't chuckle any more, because the sun was beating down at its highest angle, and the grass was humid and full of ants and bugs. At least one large ant crawled up his leg and bit, and sweat trickled continuously, itching. It was suffocating to stay still, but he was grimly patient and watchful.

He could see through the doorway, under the boats, and the sprawl of Gogg's body. It was past noon and he was hungry.

IN THE boathouse, Middie was frowning, stifling in the heat. It had been such a long time now that she was uncertain about anything. Suppose she had really killed him, too, and he was lying dead outside with no way of her finding out except by looking. Certainly she had fired back fast enough to get him. It was true that he had fired a following shot, but he might have done that at random while he was dying. She wouldn't hear him fall, not unless he struck the side of the house in going to the ground. No one but a fiend could wait this long, and wait and wait and wait.

She glanced at her watch. She didn't know when this thing had started, but guessed that it had been

going on for more than an hour. It was after noon, and she was so hungry that along with the baking heat of the boathouse she was nauseated. And her proximity to the dead man didn't contribute to the comfort of her environment. In short, she was thinking to herself with more and more conviction that Carpenter was dead. She wanted him to be. The only way to find out was go and look, because she couldn't stand much more of this strain.

She raised her head slowly to look over the corpse and down the shoulder of weedy lawn, but keeping back under the toolbench so that she couldn't be spotted through the window behind her.

The light, sharp crack of the .22 sounded, and the bullet socked into the leg of the bench next to her head, a miss. She could see a wisp of smoke in the sunshine, drifting away from that bush fifty feet from the house. She could even see Cyril's head behind the bush, fired, and hit it.

That is, she would have hit it if it had been his head. For, as soon as he had fired, he crawled down the slope out of sight, having left a cranium-size boulder where he had been. The .38 bullet hit the stone and ricocheted in a withdrawing whine to one side.

Thereupon he rose to his feet and ascended the slope. With a grim leer—the expression wasn't anything else—he headed long-leggedly for the boathouse. Through the space under the launches she couldn't see anything but his legs, with the trousers flapping. Wryly, she looked at the heavyish revolver in her hand. A fine marksman, she. She'd go on

pulling the trigger forever, as though the gun never had to be reloaded.

Carpenter approached the doorway at an angle, still cautious but quite sure in his mind, certain that the first shot he had heard was the one that she had pegged into Gogg.

HE STEPPED into the boathouse and stood there, looking overheated, his face ruddy and shining with sweat, as she got up from the floor. They faced each other, a little more than a dozen feet apart; she pointed the revolver at him, and he was aiming the rifle from his hip. He ordered, "Drop the revolver, Lassie."

"Suppose you drop the rifle," she countered.

"Oh, no," he refused; his voice was hoarse and angry. He had an ugly temper and intended to demonstrate it physically. "That revolver holds only six cartridges, and you've fired all six. Drop it, now, will you?"

She took a long chance; she aimed the revolver with care while he showed her his yellow teeth in a grin. There was the same deafening report when she pulled the trigger. Her aim was good this time, but the slug struck a brass fitting on the farther launch and was socked down at an angle into the wood of the boat itself.

The grin left Carpenter's face; he shifted a foot as though he were going to run, but then he stood his ground. "All right," he said. "If it wasn't six shots before, it is now. Drop the revolver on the bench behind you, and come around here. Or I'll come around after you."

"No, you drop that rifle," she said. "This is a .38, and that's only

a .22. Don't you think I went through Gogg's pockets for extra cartridges? Be sensible," she said persuasively. "Put the rifle down and we'll go along to Headquarters in town. They'd like to see you. As far as the murder goes, you left signs like a blazed trail when you tossed that girl out your window. But they'd like to ask questions about some of your other crooked work."

"Just bluffing, of the garden variety," he said.

"For one thing," she explained, "we have a really good fingerprint man. The last place the Brooke girl had her wrists was inside your hands, and he can almost show a jury a technicolor short of you swinging her out the window. Now come along. If I don't bring you in, somebody else will."

Sweating, he said grimly, "The hell with that. Your revolver is empty. Goggie kept a few loose cartridges in his coat, but his coat is upstairs. On the other hand, I have four or five bullets left in the magazine here. Go ahead and shoot."

"I will in a minute," she threatened. "Maybe I'd better. It's just that they can't talk to you down at Headquarters if you're dead."

"Naturally not," he agreed, gravely. "Neither will you talk to anyone."

He took slow aim at her to see what she would do, risking his life because he hadn't anything else to do; she kept the revolver pointed at him, shoving it forward slightly. He could have killed her, but the fear of being shot dead, himself, held him from pulling the trigger. It was a standoff. She held her breath, moist-



She'd only meant to wing him, but his gun went off as soon as she touched the trigger. He was dead.

ened her lips and stood very still.

There was the psychology of it, too, of his shooting the girl when she was wearing only the inadequate undies they had let her keep, and stockings.

She took her breath, probably the

last one, lifting her breast and said, "Drop the rifle, quick."

As a last resort she was going to throw the revolver at him, and turned a little to the side, when it happened. It was the most astonishing thing she had ever seen.

A long, bare, sinewy arm, glowing with bronze hair, appeared. It was like something happening in a movie—the fingers coming into view, the powerful arm slipping around Carpenter from behind, the violent reach for the gun as the hitchhiker, Borg, stepped into view. He jerked up the barrel and wrenched it from Cyril's hands, when it went off aimlessly just because of the finger hooked through the trigger guard.

Borg said melodramatically, making Middie laugh gently, "The lady said to drop the rifle."

Cyril turned around fast and went for him; there was nothing for Borg to do but club him with the butt of the rifle. The Swede had come in very handy indeed, and she would never regret picking him up. Then he took a long look at her in her underthings and said frankly, a little breathless, "Holy saints on a raft. Pardon me, Miss."

THEY telephoned, and the local cops came and took over; Middie and Hal Borg were allowed to run one of the launches down into the water, because the cops knew him, and the launch headed diagonally across the irregular lake.

"I work at Mittelfarr's Boat Plant; I guess you remember," Borg explained, talking over the *boo-o-o-rr-r-r* of the powerful motor. He swallowed. "I guess you remember my telling you about it.

"The fellas were kidding me about seeing you kissing—I mean us kissing there in the car in front of the plant.

"There was one fella who's been working there for about sixty-nine years, and he asked me if I knew

your folks. I asked who. And he said the Wainwrights, and told me where the house was."

He let the motor idle, so that he wouldn't have to shout, and the boat crept with a throbbing that was hardly a sound. She dipped her hand into the shushing sound of the clean water, listening carefully. He was driving. He stopped the motor on purpose, not pretending that they had run out of gas; they drifted while he went on talking, way out in the middle of the lake.

"I didn't want to go over and bother you or anything like that, but then at lunch hour the boss told me to go look for Carpenter's speedboat; it wasn't at his dock, and he had only made a few payments on it. The boss thought someone had stolen it, because Carpenter hasn't been up here.

"Then I heard about that old boat of yours, that was one of ours, that your aunt bought rebuilt from us several years ago so she could get to town. I just thought I would pay off by fixing up the launch for you. I could do it in a couple of evenings, or over a week-end. I found the estimate in the files. That was five or six years ago, but I looked at the boat and didn't see anything more that was wrong except for the opened seams. I haven't got anything to do evenings, anyhow," he finished lamely.

She didn't embarrass him by making cracks about his rather sidelong offer. She said, "That was a narrow squeak, about Gogg's revolver. There weren't any bullets left; I searched his pockets, and he wasn't carrying any loose." She giggled briefly with relief, and apologized

for feeling loose-witted. "It was just luck that I found his watch. It fell out of his watchpocket and he'd fallen on it so that I didn't see it at first. There was a short chain attached to it, and on the end of the chain was one .38 bullet."

"Sure, a watchfob. I've seen them," said Borg.

"There was a hole through the nose of the bullet," she said. "I spread the link, and put the cartridge in the revolver. At first I thought it wouldn't go in, because the nose was mashed. I jammed it in, and I was afraid it would go off, and then when I had to shoot at Carpenter I was afraid that it wouldn't go off. Think of that," she marveled. "I fired at him six times and didn't hit him once."

Hal Borg hadn't made any passes at her at all, out on the lake. He confessed, "You know, I'm kind of afraid of you, now that I know you're a detective. I can hardly believe that you are."

"It's just a job like any other job," she remarked.

"Pardon me," he said baldly, "but I never saw anything before like the way you looked when I went up behind Carpenter. I almost didn't yank the rifle out of his hands. It was close."

HE SOUNDED anxious. She leaned back in the seat, turning up her face, and her laughter was just audible. The boat was scarcely moving, and it was getting suffocatingly hot. Suddenly he kissed her, very briefly, on the cheek, and started the motor; the screw chewed up the water, and then they began to move and had a breeze.

"How about that girl of yours down in the city?" she asked.

"That is just a kind of brother and sister arrangement," he said. "She wants me yoost—just to get ahead. Personally I would rather stay here and make boats. I know boats, and they don't make them in the city."

She thought of Joe McManus, the detective, who was continually on the make for her. That was a sort of brother-and-sister arrangement, too. Right now he must be parked in Carpenter's house in the city. Waiting, waiting, drinking and getting a pot. She didn't know whether she liked police work so much any more, getting pawed in theatres, accosted on the street, hunting up wayward girls and all that. She liked it up here. Always had.

"Why didn't you kiss me the way you did in front of Mittelfarr's?" she asked tentatively. It was so very odd, her being completely sure of herself and unsure at the same time.

His lung capacity must have been enormous, because he released an uncommonly deep sigh. After which he said, "I couldn't hardly dare think you would say something like that. You don't dare keep on thinking you're lucky, because you get disappointed."

He let go of the wheel and looked at her questioningly. She simply returned his look, with her lips smiling slightly and shiny with lipstick. She warned, "I'm a city-dweller, and I'm going to get sunburned if you wait much longer."

He took her in his arms gingerly, then with determination, while the speedboat traveled slowly in circles. After a while he took the wheel

(Continued on page 122)

NEVER

By
**LAURENCE
DONOVAN**



He fired — but hadn't expected to see his own wife holding out her hands to him, as though pleading. . . .

BRADY relaxed. This was not a propitious spot for murder. The long, snooty car snored softly through the winding highways of Old Westbury.

Brady guessed murder here would be discreet and quiet. There would be no violence. The swanky, pioneer families inhabiting Old Westbury would conduct any killings on hand with secrecy and circumspection.

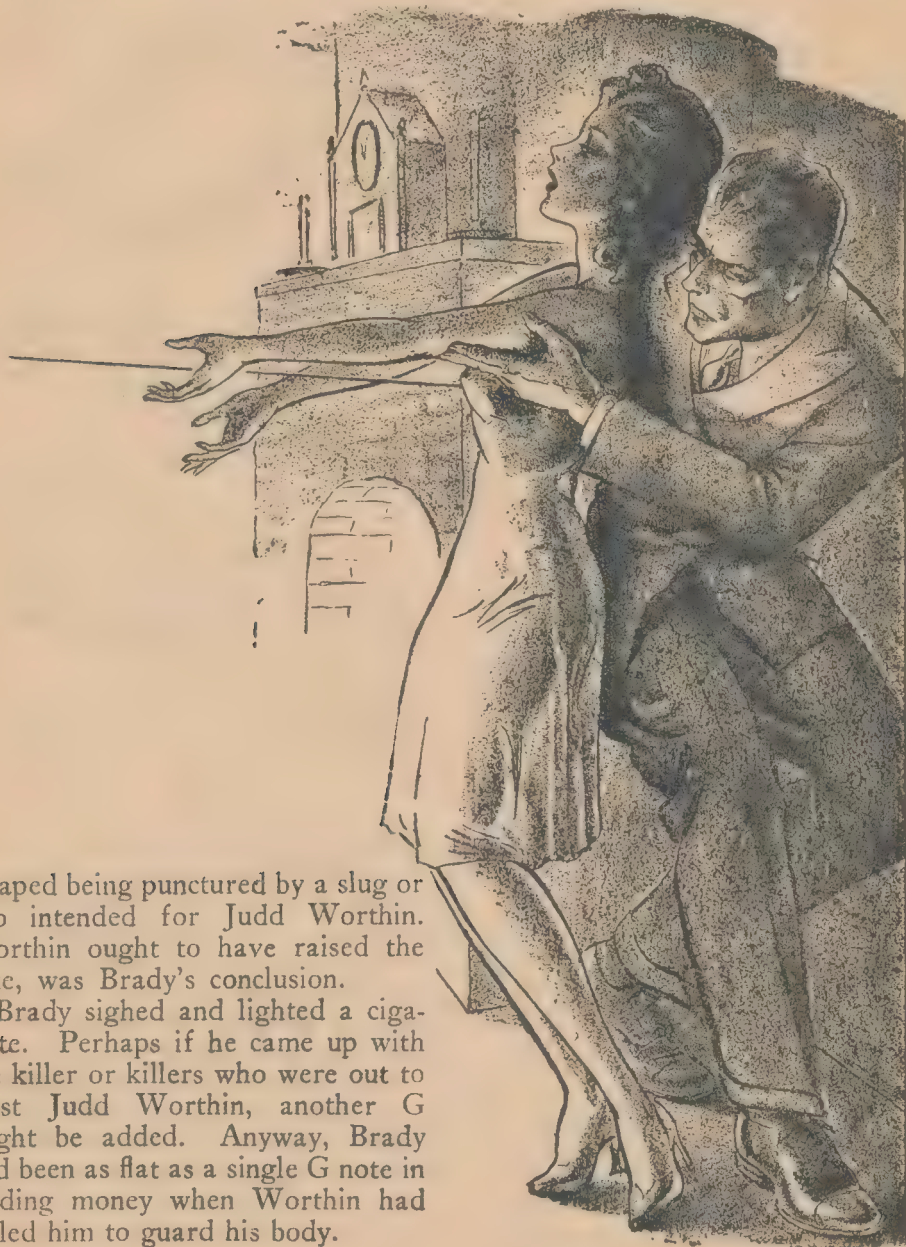
Brady would have dozed. His bare, rusty head nodded under the sleepiness of the drowsy twilight. But his eyes were too full of the dainty doll snuggled to Judd Worthin's big shoulder in the seat ahead.

The girl was such a lovely that Brady didn't think the ante was high enough to keep her white skin from being punctured. But it didn't take money to make him want for himself the killer who hired other killers

HIRE A KILLER

Hell! Brady felt cheated. A single G wasn't enough to make sure Miss Dela Deming's creamy white skin

Since he had seen her, Brady was sure that, if he had it, he would have put up twenty-five G's at least. You



escaped being punctured by a slug or two intended for Judd Worthin. Worthin ought to have raised the ante, was Brady's conclusion.

Brady sighed and lighted a cigarette. Perhaps if he came up with the killer or killers who were out to blast Judd Worthin, another G might be added. Anyway, Brady had been as flat as a single G note in folding money when Worthin had called him to guard his body.

didn't find her kind of innocent, blue-eyed *pretty* once in a blue moon. At least you didn't find it in the sporty cafe society Judd Worthin had the marks of frequenting.

Her hair was like finely spun gold against the sunset filtering through the Old Westbury trees. Her bare, white shoulders started Brady's thick fingers twitching. He would like to get his hands on the dog who would endanger that kind of armful even by accident.

Judd Worthin drove fast but smoothly. Despite fine lines of dissipation around his eyes, Brady had seen that Worthin had everything that it takes to attract a swell dish like Dela Deming.

"It'll be late, Brady, and you'll have to stay a day or so to plan all of the system," said Worthin's mellow, pleasing voice over his shoulder. "In fact it might be a week or two before you change all the contacts."

"Sure, Mr. Worthin," grunted Brady. "A lot of old wiring may have to be altered."

That was their prearranged fiction. Brady was being brought out to the Judd Worthin estate to go over the obsolete lighting system of the very "early American" residence Worthin had recently leased. Or so Miss Dela Deming had been informed.

Brady tried to ignore the *pretty's* way of snuggling close to Worthin's wide, polo-playing, big-game hunting shoulder. He judged Worthin could well have been her father as ages compared.

That the delightfully lovely Dela Deming was to pass the week-end at Judd Worthin's estate was not extraordinary. Brady reflected that

engaged couples in these troubled times may see a lot of each other.

That wasn't any of his business. Judd Worthin had reported to police two attempts to rub him out. Slugs had left marks in his car two days before. The day after that a truck had climbed onto a sidewalk and narrowly missed removing Worthin.

"All because I only did my duty as a citizen," Worthin had informed the police and Brady, today, when he had hired him. "I am sure I saw two men I've known as diamond smugglers, coming off a fishing boat. I reported it. The customs boys missed finding anything, but they've had an eye on the fishing fleet."

Worthin had displayed one crudely printed warning that had been mailed. He had received two telephone calls demanding he give up his waterfront office where he had owned a spice importing business for two years before the war had hit him hard.

So here was Brady. For Judd Worthin had received a third warning that he might expect a visit at home at any time.

"I don't give a damn, for I can take care of myself," was Worthin's appeal to Brady. "But Miss Deming, she's my fiancée, was with me both times the killers almost got me. I don't want to stay away from her or have her alarmed too much, but I'm afraid she may get hurt. So I want the killers."

That being one of Tom Brady's specialties, Worthin's fee of a grand, with a promise of more if he succeeded, was manna, even if it might come from a hotter place than heaven.

So they were in Old Westbury.

They would reach Judd Worthin's very early American domicile shortly after dark, Brady was informed.

AT THIS moment, Brady was collecting a little more than his fee. Just watching the curvaceous doll and the milky whiteness of her throat, half turned toward him, was a kind of payoff. Then it became evident that the "great lover" Judd Worthin might be just a bit more than the waiting and hopeful fiancé of dainty Miss Deming.

Brady hitched his big shoulders higher to watch a striped ground squirrel dart behind a tree. Thus, entirely by accident, he noticed Worthin's free hand resting companionably upon the rounded, silken knee of the Deming *pretty*. And the very desirable little lady was doing everything but purr like a contented kitten.

Such a maddening pair of gams had seldom ever come under Brady's keen and experienced eye. He whispered an oath under his breath as the Deming *pretty's* white shoulder seemed to ripple with pleasure, and she pressed still closer to Judd Worthin.

Well, what the hell business was it of his if the Mrs. Worthin-to-be was willing to have her moments in advance? That's what week-ends were for, wasn't it, even in sacro-sanct Old Westbury?

Brady compelled himself to attend strictly to possibly lurking places of murderous ambushers, and to occasional passing cars. Especially he kept an eye upon occupants of each auto approaching.

As he had judged, nothing violent happened in Old Westbury. Only

as the sun disappeared and the inside of the big car darkened, Judd Worthin and the Deming doll appeared to become even more companionable. Worthin was now approaching his rented estate.

Dammit! If that was the way it was, why didn't Worthin turn the wheel over to him and take advantage of the roomy rear seat of the car? At least Brady could keep his mind much clearer by watching the road.

This vagrant thought, entirely alien to his purpose in being here, was annoying Brady when Worthin sent the big car into a black tunnel under light excluding elm trees. There it was that the bluish fire of an automatic rifle started up from the side of the road, its explosions racketing, and its slugs rat-a-tatting on the fender and then the door of the limousine.

Worthin might have made a mistake of judgment in failing to shoot the car ahead. Or his instinctive swerving of the car off the narrow highway might have been the best possible move.

Brady, dragging his .38, threw his weight forward. It was no time for courtesy or thought of gentleness. One big hand went between the Deming girl's shoulders, pushing her roughly ahead and downward.

Even then, Brady was sure that automatic rifle had the force to drill a steel jacketed bullet through the car's door. However, Worthin's quick wit or his automatic reaction swung the rear of the car toward the unseen gunman.

Having made sure the Deming lovely was unwounded, Brady twisted open the rear door. He was

smart enough to choose the door farthest from the hidden marksman, intending to get into the darkness and try a circling movement.

"I'll get the damn', yellow killer this time!"

That was Judd Worthin's suddenly heavy, raging voice.

"You, Brady, stick by Miss Deming! The ——!"

It was Brady's idea that his was the assignment to go after the attempting murderer, and Worthin's duty to stick by his girl friend. He said so with angry protest, and landed outside the car, now stalled cross-wise in the narrow road.

To his amazement, Judd Worthin appeared to have more temper than good sense. For Worthin, a heavy automatic swinging in his hand, jumped squarely into the light beams of the car, crossing toward the spot where the rifle had been fired.

NOW Judd Worthin might be a client worth a quick grand, but Brady had his job in his own mind.

"Get back, or down out of the light, Worthin!" he shouted, as he slid around the rear of the car, and tried to locate the exact spot where he might place a few .38 slugs with the most hope of results.

"Mr. Brady! Please! Wait! My leg!"

The Deming *pretty* had a husky contralto that went oddly with her delicately fashioned daintiness. Brady hoped she had not been seriously wounded. The reckless Judd Worthin vanished from the car lights as the rifle flamed again, and went crashing into some bushes where it was entirely black.

Brady jolted three fast shots at

the blaze of the rifle, but heard nothing to indicate he had hit the ambusher. Then he detected running feet of a man going away, and the crazy and careless Judd Worthin was making plenty of noise following.

"Worthin!" Brady yelled it. "Come back! Miss Deming's hurt! That's my job!"

His sense of sound told him the rifleman was circling among the trees. It occurred to him that his flight might be a trick. There might be more than one gunman. Usually that brand of killer avoided playing a lone hand, especially in the darkness of the country.

Worthin was still moving away. Brady called to the Deming girl.

"You badly hit? If not," and he spoke more softly, "get out of the car and off to one side of the bushes."

"Yes, Mr. Brady, yes," the girl replied. "It's not so bad. I'll do that. But please, find Judd! He'll be hurt! I've been so afraid!"

It was a matter for split second decision now. Brady could still hear the moving gunman, veering away, but apparently still circling in a direction that could bring him back to the car. And Judd Worthin's pursuit had become quiet.

Brady had to take a chance the Deming girl would be all right for a few minutes. He was a big man, stripping at nearly two hundred, but he had enough woods training to push noiselessly and swiftly among the trees, still hearing the movement of the circling killer.

He was perhaps fifty yards from the car, trying to keep its lights in sight, and at the same time cut across to head off the rifleman. Suddenly



Brady's aim was never surer.
He fired once, and the man
screamed hoarsely.

the killer's steps died out. Brady listened, halting, but he could not hear Worthin moving either.

He swore under his breath at the poor showing Worthin had caused him to make. He had to admit that in the utter darkness of the trees, it was impossible to guess the position of another man unless he made some sound.

He caught sound then, but from two directions at once. He was convinced he heard muttering voices. That meant the ambusher had a companion or had met someone. And he was crouched, starting toward the voices when the Deming girl screamed over by the car.

Brady went crashing back into the highway. He was just in time to see Dela Deming appear between him and the headlights, trying to run, but limping. And he saw a shadowy bulk close to the car, with the abrupt, dull shine of a gun's metal.

Brady's aim was never surer. A man screamed hoarsely and a gun exploded. The bulky shadow dropped and feet kicked around for two seconds, then were still.

BRADY reached Dela Deming just as she stumbled and fell. He had one awe-inspiring glimpse of nicely sculptured legs, wonderfully smooth, white. One thigh was marred by a small furrow where a slug had penetrated the flesh.

Blood was welling from the wound. Brady paused long enough to staunch the flow with a clean strip torn from his white handkerchief. His big fingers fumbled because they tangled.

It might have been pain, or it might have been something else. The

Deming *pretty's* body trembled. Her thin waist was torn and that didn't add a bit to Brady's peace of mind.

He heard someone coming back through the bushes. He got back to the man beside the car as Judd Worthin came into view, swearing lustily. Worthin's face was scratched.

"I damn' near got the *so-and-so!*" Worthin's language ignored the presence of Dela Deming. Brady noted that she stared at Worthin as if he were a new person. "But he ducked me and I dived into a muck-hole," added Worthin.

Worthin's muddy clothes bore out his claim. Then Worthin gave a whistle.

"What—who's this, Brady?"

"A guy with a yen for turning the heater on your fiance, seeing you weren't here, Worthin. Ever see him before? Know him?"

Brady flicked a light over a flat-nosed face with curdled, pugilistic ears.

"Nope, never did," said Worthin. "What happened, Brady?"

"He had a rod aimed at Miss Deming, and we had a contest to see who would shoot first. I won. He's Nick Ladoni, gun for hire, and cheap. Pal'ed around with Dopey Meggs, who'd peddle murder for a pinch of stuff."

"Great glory!" exclaimed Worthin. "You mean to say he was set to kill Miss Deming? That means they'll get at me any way they can. You've got your G, Brady. It's another G for the fellow who got away."

"You heard only one, Worthin?" demanded Brady.

"Yeah, why? I lost him, then got lost myself."

Brady nodded. "G or no G, I'll get the other killer in this game," he said. Something about Worthin's words failed to ring true.

Worthin was staring at Dela Deming. She was sitting on the running board of the car. Her skirt was carefully hiked up above the fringe of her silk panties. Brady's handkerchief was bound around her thigh.

"Darling!" exclaimed Worthin. "Does it hurt?"

"It's feeling so much better, since Mr. Brady doctored it," the girl said huskily, her eyes glowing.

"Brady, he bound that up? There?"

"He was nice about it, very nice, Judd," the girl said.

Brady saw her small, shapely hands running along an emerald necklace of exquisite design. He heard Worthin bite off an oath. He did not like Worthin's tone and he set him straight.

"The name's Brady, Worthin, not Casanova!" He chopped out the words. Then he added. "Will you phone the police, or will I do it, about this guy Ladoni?"

Worthin was dark-skinned. His eyes were darker than his face. Brady could see them narrow, even in that faint light.

"Neither one, Brady," said Worthin. "We'll put this Ladoni into the trunk of the car. I've an idea that may trap his partner."

Brady started to say, "Count me out," but changed his mind. He kept thinking of hearing two men talking out there in the woods. Yet it appeared Judd Worthin believed there was but one gunman.

A queer idea formed in Brady's

mind. The Deming girl was still staring at him. She appeared to be wanting to tell him something, but unable to make up her mind.

BRADY was averse to riding the dead Ladoni in the trunk of the car. But Judd Worthin was his client and the boss. Brady had thumbed his nose at the law before, and he could see the possibility of trapping the other killer or killers.

The Deming girl's wound did not appear to be serious. But for the remainder of the ride to the old Castle-on-the-Rhine residence misnamed "early American," the little lady had ceased to cuddle up to Judd Worthin.

Brady trapped her shining eyes watching him several times. He had his own way with pretties, but it hadn't ever been his custom to break in by literally binding up their wounds.

"Needless to say, Brady, we will keep what has happened a secret from my house guests," suggested Worthin, as he sent the big car along a winding driveway among a number of guest cottages.

"Sure—sure, you're the boss," growled Brady. "Only Miss Deming's injury should have attention."

"I'll see to that," grunted Worthin. "For the present, Brady, you'll have a room directly over mine. It has been occupied by the butler. But you are directly over my window and a porch roof."

Brady was noticing guests appearing in the doorways of some of the cottages. A slim, dark girl was outlined in one door by the light behind her. Her figure showed in a gauze-like garment.

The girl's hand waved. Brady

would have sworn that Worthin's left hand, outside the car door, make a peremptory signal. He was also convinced that Dela Deming's pretty face flashed around and that her red lips were compressed angrily.

Brady had the thought that Judd Worthin was a man who looked out for himself quite well.

But it was when Judd Worthin stopped the car by the main entrance that Brady was suddenly on guard. A little man with a lot of surplus hair and a hooked nose started from a nearby cottage toward the car.

"Horter?" said Brady under his breath. "Now what would that double dealer in diamonds be doing out here?"

For he had identified the hooked-nose, little man. At almost the same second Horter saw Brady's impressive bulk climbing from Worthin's car. And as Brady showed, Horter was turned, hotfooting it back through the door of his cottage.

Brady heard Worthin start to speak, to call out, as if to halt Horter, then he had glanced at Brady and changed his mind.

JOE BRADY turned out his lights as he looked from the third floor window out over Judd Worthin's big estate. His broad mouth wore a smile as he noticed the house wires of what Worthin had informed him was the house-to-cottages telephone system of the Worthin place, which operated automatically.

With his room lights out, Brady had a fairly clear view of the broad, treeless space around which a dozen cottages of the guests were circled. He could see a light burning in the cottage from which he had seen Lafe

Horter, the hot jewel expert, come and go. The roof of a porch slanted a few feet below his window.

Brady was wondering what idea Judd Worthin had in connection with keeping the body of Nick Ladoni in the trunk of his car?

Brady heard the door of his room open softly. He was on guard instantly, hand touching the automatic on his table.

"Mr. Brady—please—"

It was the husky, low whisper of Dela Deming. She was like a white shadow crossing the room. Then her cool hands were upon his face and she was cautioning him to be quiet.

"Listen, lady!" Brady was growling. "I don't know what you have in mind, but I don't play—"

"Please—wait—don't misjudge me too quickly—"

It would have required a better man than Joe Brady to have resisted the soft, warm pressure of her hand upon his lips.

"I'm not playing—please, understand that—it's something else, Mr. Brady—do you know about jewels, good and bad?"

"Joe's the name, to keep it short," he grunted. "A'right. You aren't playin', so then it's some kind of a beef? Sure. I know ice."

She was very close. And she was very cuddly. So he crooked a big arm and held her there.

"That's it—all right, Joe, my emeralds, and a bracelet, and some rings—do you know about things like that?"

Brady expelled his breath sharply. What might have followed was interrupted. Judd Worthin called from the floor below.

Diving toward the blazing gun, he took the sting and burn of slugs and powder.



"Dela! Where are you? Dela!"

"Later—he mustn't know I'm here," she whispered.

Then the Deming pretty's surprise

visit was over, and she was gone. Brady heard voices murmuring in the room below. It was no shock that the cuddly Deming girl and Judd

Worthin should be occupying the same room.

Brady had rather expected it, from the general layout of the Worthin estate, with its convenient cottages.

But what had Dela Deming meant to convey to him about her jewels. He had noticed her emerald necklace when he had attended her wounded thigh. Now he knew what it had been that had drawn his attention. Why the appearance of Horter fitted in.

The Dela Deming emeralds were beautiful—imitations.

THE windows being open, Brady was getting more of an earful than he wanted from the Judd Worthin room below. Then he heard Worthin's window close softly. A door opened and shut and he was sure the Deming girl had left Worthin alone.

Brady acted quickly. The ground telephone wires crossed directly under his windows. A minute later Brady had suspended a plastic cylinder of the size of a electrical cell battery close to the phone wires.

The contrivance was an X-ray ear. It was made up of 80,000 turns of fine wire around an alloy core of aluminum, copper and nickel. Attached ear-phones brought Brady both ends of any phone conversation by induction, without the X-ray ear contacting the phone wire.

He caught but part of a conversation, the unpleasant words of Horter—

"But dammit man, it may be impossible to restore all of them—"

Judd Worthin was talking—

"Every damn' stone has to be re-

placed, Horter, and I don't care what it costs—something new has come up—she's worth a hundred times the rocks, understand? I'll cut you in, see! But she must never find out we took the stuff and her money—"

Horter replied with an expressive string of oaths.

Brady put aside the ear-phones. Connecting this conversation with the Dela Deming reference to her jewelry, Brady had the picture. The Deming girl had been robbed of jewelry by substitution.

But something had come up that made Dela Deming more valuable than the theft of either jewels or money. Judd Worthin had represented that he intended marrying the Deming girl.

Brady was confronted by a puzzle that suddenly appeared to go far beyond the mere threats to kill Judd Worthin.

Suddenly all of the Judd Worthin establishment seemed stirring. Brady could hear merriment of a wild party from one of the terraces. Splashes and laughter came from a swimming pool.

Brady was watching the cottage into which he had seen Horter disappear. Strings of colored lights showed the wraith-like figure of Dela Deming hurry across a lawn.

A moment later Judd Worthin came into the light. He moved almost furtively. He was in the shadows a moment. But he reappeared just before the door of Horter's cottage opened and closed.

Brady eased out and down to the floor below.

Judd Worthin's wall safe was a pushover for Brady. The dupli-

cate of Dela Deming's emerald necklace, a bracelet of diamonds and rubies and an odd ring with diamonds surrounding a sapphire were the net result of Brady's nefarious investigation.

Just for luck, Brady removed the jewels. He slipped them casually behind some books on a shelf. That was when the house phones buzzed. Brady hesitated, then pronged it open.

"Yes?" he whispered huskily.

"Judd, dearest! I'm waiting? You promised—"

That was not Dela Deming's voice. It was not anyone Brady had ever heard before. He made his own voice as vague as a hoarse whisper could accomplish.

"I know—something came up—right away—"

He could not risk a darling, dearest, honey or what-not. You never knew what pet names a guy like Judd Worthin would employ.

"Judd, dearest—" The whisper was a little frantic. "You must get rid of her—you understand! I was watching—and who was that other mug—was that the one who's to take the rap?— If he is—where's Nick—he hasn't showed up—"

Brady had a tightness across his throat. Now he was beginning to add two and two, and he was getting more than four. He took a chance. He kept his voice hoarsely whispering.

"Cut it off— Nick's on his way— can't talk—someone came in—be right over—"

He closed the connection. Only one woman had been watching as they had arrived. The dark, sweet little person outlined in the light of

a cabin door. And she was expecting Nick—?

That would be Nick Ladoni—? That's why Nick Ladoni had come visiting in the trunk of Judd Worthin's car. It added up.

Brady tagged the top of his own dumb skull with his forefinger. So he had been hired to protect Judd Worthin from being bumped off?

Dela Deming had tried to tell him something about her jewels. Worthin had talked with Horter about replacing jewelry that had already been substituted for the real thing. And yet he had just found stones very much like the real thing in Judd Worthin's own safe.

Brady recalled that he had just promised a cute, little lady to be right over to her cabin. Providing he had guessed correctly and that was the proper cabin.

JOE BRADY approached the log cabin in the darkness. He never eavesdropped without a purpose. There seemed a purpose here. Indeed, the little lady in the cabin appeared to be expecting company, of the kind she could trust utterly.

Brady rapped discreetly. The door opened quickly. Almost before he could draw deep breath he was in. The soft, winding arms were warming and welcoming. The luscious, parted lips were assurance that some angles of a private dick's job were not to be passed up lightly.

Brady was also aware that the little lady evidently had not been in the arms of whoever she believed him to be for some time past. And he also was instantly informed that he was not the party she had been expecting.

"Judd, dearest—"

The whisper and a heady perfume were blended as Brady's cheek rested in the soft and wonderful V of a welcoming throat. With but the logfire for light, the mistake was to be expected, only Brady had not quite expected it.

Nevertheless, the quivering softness of a slimly desirable body was not exactly to be cast aside by Joe Brady. His hostess became a little storm of welcome that no man could resist.

Without speaking. Brady picked her up in his arms and carried her to the wide divan near the fire. For the moment he had the sense of believing her to be Dela Deming. And then—

The firelight struck across her black, lustrous hair.

Brady was fast. But he realized too late that a trap had been set for both the woman and him. The automatic chopped from a corner inside the cabin, proving the killer had been planted. Brady took the cut of a slug across his chin. He threw the woman from him violently. But the hidden killer had been too well planted. The woman gurgled out a scream and her dark head snapped backward.

Brady failed to prevent the woman from falling, because he was diving toward the blazing gun. Both sides of his head took the sting and burn of slugs and powder. But his weight crumpled the gunman into the wall.

Brady smashed rights and lefts, feeling flesh and bone yielding to his knuckles. But there was a crashing blow that put out all the lights behind his eyes.

JOE BRADY heard feet clumping out of the cabin. He opened his eyes against sharp pain. The firelight showed that the dark-haired lovely woman before the fireplace was crumpled and still.

The gunman he had crushed into the wall was lying quiet, but he was groaning, then whispering. Brady knew he had cracked the gunman's skull when he had slammed him into the logs.

"That's you, Nick?"

The dying killer had the hoarseness of death in his throat.

"Sure—sure," said Brady in a low tone, realizing he was being mistaken for Nick Ladoni. "What the hell—you turned the heat on me—you—"

Brady waited. The other man drew a painful breath.

"You didn't—Worthin—"

"Yeah?" Brady got it out. "We didn't get Worthin. You thought I was Worthin—?"

The dying gunman had a sudden spurt of consciousness.

"Worthin—hell! He said to get that Deming dame, so I—!"

Brady was sure the dying man was Dopey Meggs. And Meggs had but few words left to speak.

"Nick—Worthin crossed us all around—told me to bump off that black-haired doll he was married to—'cause he found out the Deming dame was coming into big dough—see? You an' me would-a been sittin' in on that dough, Nick, so he steered you here—an' Worthin got you—an' had you turn the heat on me—Nick—his wife's dead an' we're—finished—"

With that, Brady knew Dopey Meggs was finished. Then he heard

men shouting and women chattering outside the cabin. Over the push of guests crowding toward the place, Judd Worthin's commanding voice rang out.

"Keep back, everybody! Maybe one of the killers is waiting in there! He might have got Miss Randall an' be lyin' low! I'll go ahead! Horter! Take this gun an' cover the back! If I only knew where he went, I had a Detective Brady out here lookin' for the killers! Maybe he's in there too!"

Brady was crawling slowly across the cabin floor. He cursed under his breath. Sure! Judd Worthin knew damn' well he was in there! Worthin's only mistake was that he probably believed he had either killed Brady or laid him out so cold he could not possibly have learned any of the truth.

That Miss Randall stuff? It covered the dark, little lady. And Dopey Meggs had said that she was Worthin's wife, and had been ordered rubbed out after Worthin had discovered Dela Deming had a fortune coming.

But Dopey Meggs was dead. How could Brady prove the truth?

Brady heard Judd Worthin opening the cabin door slowly. Brady had reached the inert figure of the murdered woman. She was as dead as she could ever be. A slug had split her heart. Virtually all of her blood had drained out.

The low burning log in the fireplace cast a vague light. Brady was crouched, tense, when Worthin's broad shoulders filled the space of the cabin doorway.

In Brady's mind was proof enough of the killer. But suddenly he wanted

for himself that killer who hired other killers, double crossed them, employed a private detective to make everything look good, double crossed his wife, and was doubtless also crossing up Lafe Horter on jewels already stolen from Dela Deming.

That was some score to settle. And Brady's proof was slight, if the dead, little woman had been living here as a "Miss Randall."

The firelight flickered a little. And then Brady saw the automatic in Judd Worthin's hand. That was merely a pose, thought Brady. Worthin expected no resistance, no life inside the cabin.

Least of all did Judd Worthin expect to see the little woman who had been his wife sit up suddenly in the firelight, reaching out her white hands, as if imploring him to help her.

And with that movement of the woman's body, there was a low, husky whisper, just as Brady had heard this woman speak over the phone.

"Judd—darling—you've come in time—"

Judd Worthin's low curse, the instinctive action were exactly as Brady had judged they would be. On his oath, Worthin shouted, to cover his wife's supposed voice, and he cut loose with the automatic.

Brady could almost feel the thudding of two slugs into the woman's corpse. Then Brady was on his feet. He lunged on silent feet through the darkness at the side of the room. His .38 smashed down upon Worthin's wrist and snapped it. His ripping left landed upon Worthin's big chin, driving him to his heels.

Then Brady pivoted, slashing the

.38 across Worthin's face. They went to the floor together.

Even then, Judd Worthin was quick-witted, smart. He gasped out a few words as he fell.

"Good God! I shot—Miss Randall—by mistake! I—"

Brady made a good job of rough dental work on Worthin's nice, even teeth then, stopping his speech.

SOME guests were fleeing. Women screamed. Judd Worthin was out. Those who imagined Joe Brady must be the killer let him go. That way, Brady reached the rear of the cabin.

He pinned the ratty Lafe Horter to the log wall, pinching his throat. In a few words he gave the slick jewel fence no choice.

"In about half an hour you'll be spilling your story," said Brady. "If you change one comma from what I've told you, that'll make just one more job for the fellow who juices the hot seat."

A few minutes later they were in the room of Judd Worthin. A Sergeant Carter of the state police had charge. Worthin repeated his story the second time.

"It was dark inside the cabin, and Miss Randall, who has been my secretary for two years, was in the darkness," said Worthin. "I think Detective Brady was confused and fired by mistake. I thought he was the killer, and I'm afraid I hit Miss Randall's body shooting at him."

It sounded reasonable. Brady was watching the white face of Dela Deming. The girl's breasts heaved with her sharp breathing.

Brady spoke suddenly.

"Miss Deming, you will find your

stolen jewels behind the books over there where Judd Worthin hid them," he said. "And Sergeant Carter, the woman known as Miss Randall was really Mrs. Judd Worthin. She was alive, and pleading with Worthin to help her when he shot her twice. That's why—"

Judd Worthin shouted a wild oath. But Lafe Horter's little eyes looked at the Deming jewels. Then Horter spoke up.

"So help me, I was hired by Worthin to substitute some stones belonging to Miss Deming, but I can't stick with him in murder!" screeched Horter. "He didn't say he intended to have his wife killed so he could marry Miss Deming! I just learned tonight he had hired two killers to rub out Miss Deming after he had all of her money and a hundred grand in rocks, but then he found out about her other fortune—"

Brady's left exploded in Worthin's face as he jumped for Horter.

"An' the hired killers didn't kill Worthin's wife!" whined Horter. "He blasted her himself, for I saw her standing up, holding out her hands in the cabin. I wouldn't work with any murderer, so help me!"

"I'm sure at least two slugs from Worthin's gun are in his wife's body, said Brady. "In fact, I know they are, for he shot her while I was holding her in my arms. It seems that Worthin hired killers first to kill Miss Deming, but when he found out about her fortune and wanted to switch the deal, he couldn't get hold of the killers in time to call them off. They almost got Miss Deming, but Nick Ladoni, out in the trunk of Worthin's car, happened to be in the way of my .38.

"That spoiled Worthin's program. He was merely hiring me as a cover-up to try and prove later that either Miss Deming or his wife was killed by gunmen who were trying to get him. It was a nice build-up, but it never pays to hire killers. They sometimes take pride in their work."

DELA DEMING touched Brady's arm lightly. The last of the house guests were leaving the early American estate.

They were alone now in the room from which Judd Worthin and Lafe Horter had been removed.

"Joe, darling," said the Deming pretty. "I think I'll need a guard for my jewels when I get them back. Would you be—?"

"I'm not looking for an heiress, sweetheart," said Brady gruffly. "If you weren't coming into a fortune, we might get better acquainted. But as it is—"

"Joe, honey, then it's a deal," she said softly. "You see, Joe, I had that letter about a supposed fortune written and mailed to me, making sure Judd Worthin would find it. I knew he had stolen my mother's jewelry, and I wanted to see what he would do if he thought I was worth a lot more money. So you see—"

"I see—and so Judd Worthin's wife is dead, he goes up for murder, and you want me—"

He turned and walked away abruptly. Otherwise, he was sure he would have slapped her teeth in.

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I am President of the News Review Publishing Company, which corporation publishes the largest circulating afternoon daily in North Idaho. I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking

with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 45-M, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.

The Frankie &

The place was run wide open, and the soldiers loved it. Then one of them was found, brutally murdered, and the two women who were in charge knew that they must step carefully for a while or they'd be in trouble greater than they could handle



**By
ROGER
TORREY**

Johnny Murder



RANKIE and Johnny's Place was about as rough a spot as I'd ever been in, and it had Harry Shoreham's eyes bugging right out of his head. He couldn't understand how the law would let a place like that operate and he said so.

"It's places like this that are ruining our boys," he told me. "Why, it's like something in those stories you read about the Old West!"

I was getting a kick out of it. It made me think of the old-time barrel houses. They even had a professor at the piano, with the guy



He was just boiling. He said, "Why, you dirty . . . !"

smoking a cigar out of the corner of his mouth.

"The boys must like it," I said. "Nobody's dragged any of 'em in here. In fact, it looks as though some of 'em are going to be dragged out."

Two husky M. P.'s were standing by one of the booths, and the lad inside seemed to be giving them an argument. He had two girls with him, with bum written over each, and he was tighter than a tick.

He said: "G'way."

One of the boys said: "Come on, sonny."

Sonny said: "G'way."

One of the girls said: "Wha's a matter with you guys? Can't a soldier have any fun, without you come bustin' in and spoilin' it?"

The M. P. didn't waste any time. He wasn't rough but he was firm. He picked the girl up and dragged her out, without saying a word. He got sonny on the next haul—and had to hold him up when he got him in the clear.

THEN the three of them sailed out, with sonny in the middle. With sonny's feet dragging, and with his head lolling over one shoulder.

Harry Shoreham said: "Disgraceful!"

I said: "It was a nice piece of policing. There was no noise and no fuss. They'll take the kid back to camp and let him sleep it off. They won't even charge him, unless he gets so tough they have to. That was nice work."

"These boys shouldn't be allowed in a place like this."

"How would you keep 'em out? It's their money they're spending. All that can be done is look after

them, the way that was done."

"It isn't right."

I gave him more argument and then he gave me a clincher. And I didn't have another word to say. And what was worse, he gave it to me in a sad way.

"If it wasn't for this place," he said, "my brother George would be alive today."

And that stopped me, because his brother, or rather half-brother, George, had been found behind the place four days before then. Just at daylight. His head had been smashed in and he'd been rolled. He'd been drinking and he'd been flashing money and he'd been with one of the little tramps that hung around the place for what she could get. At least that was the story that came back to his people—and with it the information from the local police that they were stuck on the thing. Which was why the family hired me to look into it.

I just figured young George had been playing Stork Club in the wrong kind of joint.

RIGHT after the bouncing we met both Frankie and Johnny. Johnny was a big blond wench, possibly thirty, and still good-looking if you like the husky type.

I do.

Frankie was little and slim and dark. About the same age. Still pretty, if you like 'em fast and snappy.

I like that kind, too.

They came over and slid in the booth across from us and introduced themselves as if they were a sister act. The old "I'm Frankie"—"I'm Johnny" business. Two wise heads, I

figured. Then Frankie waved a hand around and baited for a rise.

"Howja like it?" she asked.

Harry Shoreham stammered something about it being nice, but he didn't mean it. I said the same and did.

I wasn't lying, either.

The place was about sixty feet long and half that wide. The back of it was all bar, even if all that could be sold legally was beer. Booths lined all the sides, except for a little notch where the piano player held forth. The middle was all dance floor, if what the boys and girls were doing out there could be called dancing. The bar was three deep; all the booths were filled; and the overflow was out on the floor cutting up didoes.

All in all, the place was making nothing but money—and I could understand why the girls were proud of the joint. It couldn't be classed as a nice place in any way—but it was certainly interesting. I could see where a man need never have a dull moment in the spot.

Then Frankie got down to business. She seemed to be the spokesman for the pair. She waved the card I'd sent her by the waitress, and started in.

"You're a snoop, eh? Looking into that soldier boy thing, eh? From his folks, eh?"

I said: "Right on all counts. This is his brother Harry."

Shoreham said he was glad to meet the girls. He didn't act or sound that way, though, and the girls caught it fast but let it go.

"The cops checked into it," Frankie told me. "They got Doll Higgins, the girl that was with him,

down at the pokey right now. Only one of the boys happened to stop by, and he told me they was going to turn her loose tonight. He said there was nothing against her, but that they had to hold somebody to make it look as if they was doing something. You know how these—cops are."

I said I knew how the—cops were and she got red in the face and said: "Excuse me! For a minute I forgot you was one."

I TOLD her I didn't take it seriously, and that got a laugh out of both of them. Shoreham looked pained, but I didn't expect him to go along with the kind of talk you get in that kind of spot. Then I told them what I wanted and they agreed to play ball with me. And then they left, with Frankie beckoning me out of the booth for a private word.

"I can't talk in front of that frozen-faced jerk," she said. "Look! Send him back where he belongs and stick around. Doll will head for here, the minute they open the door for her, and you can see her. Maybe you can get a line on something."

I said that was an idea and went back to Shoreham. We'd driven in late—just had picked a hotel and registered and gone right out to Frankie and Johnny's Place, and I didn't know whether he could find his way back.

I said: "You take the car and go on to the hotel. I'll get back some way. D'ya think you can find it?"

"I go back down the beach road until I hit Iris Avenue," he said. "I turn right there, until I hit Market. Then right up Market to the hotel. That right?"

"Right."

"I've got a good memory. I remember how we came out here."

I said that was fine and he left. Then both Frankie and Johnny came over, this time with a bottle of whiskey they were careful to keep out of sight.

This was to pass the time while we waited for Doll Higgins.

MY CLIENT'S boy had been in the army as a private soldier. He had been café society before then, but he'd enlisted like so many young fellows did, right after Pearl Harbor. It was a surprise to everyone, because he definitely wasn't the type. He was the kind that wasn't happy unless he was in the rото-gravures each Sunday, and each Sunday he wanted to be shown with a different young belle.

And I give him credit . . . he got the different young belles in no uncertain fashion.

He's had a private income from money his mother had left him . . . all he had to do was get along on a lousy little four thousand dollar a month income from it. At that, he barely managed to make it last the month out—he was a fast man with a dollar. I didn't know him and now I never would, but I had him picked for a rich young heel, and nothing I'd found out about him made me alter the opinion.

That last was the only thing I didn't tell Frankie and Johnny. I gave 'em the rest of the set-up straight.

I said: "You can see how it is, girls. The folks have money and lots of it. They've got influence—enough of it even to reach down here. If

this is cleaned up and the guilty party or parties caught, they'll forget about you. If it isn't, they're going to get up on their hind legs and demand something done about the place where little George was killed."

"And you'll go along with 'em on it," said Frankie. "The first thing you see that's off-side, then there we go. That it?"

"Now, Frankie," said Johnny. "You can see Drake's not that kind of fella. He wants who done the kid in. Even I can see that, and I'm not smart."

"That's right," I said.

Frankie said: "Well, here's Doll Higgins."



LOOKED at the girl coming in the door and saw she was far from alone. She had two men with her and she was carrying a load that wasn't groceries. Plainly Doll had stopped somewhere, after being discharged from the city jail, and plainly she'd tried to wear out her drinking elbow. Frankie called out something to her and she started to stagger our way and then I looked over the two boy friends.

The first was as big as a small house. He looked as though somebody would have to tell him when to come in out of the rain. He had a wide blank stare and seemed to fancy himself as a sort of Tarzan because he came across the dance floor in a straight line, elbowing everybody out of his way.

The other boy was thin and blond and wicked looking. I figured that if he was carrying a gun it would be in a hip pocket . . . there was no bulge



The three of them sailed out
—no noise, no fuss.

under his arm nor around his waist-
band . . . and his clothes fitted him

so fast that a gun would have shown.
On second thought I decided he'd

be the kind that would use a shiv, and that he was carrying it in his left coat sleeve.

This because he favored that arm—keeping it close to him and tipped a bit. If he wasn't carrying the percentage in that sleeve, I hadn't learned a thing in all my time around.

I had time to ask Frankie: "The little guy tough?" and to hear her say: "Just plenty!" and then they were with us.

Doll Higgins goggled at me when Frankie introduced me. She could still walk, but I figured two more drinks would put an end to that. The big guy's name was Hennessy, and he was about half that way. Just drunk enough to think he was tough. He scowled at me and started the party.

"Who're you?" he asked.

"Name's Sam Drake," I told him.

"What you want?"

"Nothing from you."

"Ho! Smart guy, hunh?"

His friend said: "Ah shut up, Three Star. The guy ain't bothering you any."

"I don't like his looks," said Hennessy, leaning back and glowering at me. "I don't like his looks. He better not diddle around with me or, I'll change 'em for him."

Frankie motioned to me not to take it up and introduced the thin one. His name was Mickey Sims, and unless I was wrong, he had me tagged as a cop that second. He had that watchful waiting air, right from the start.

So I gave 'em the rough hustle fast.

"You guys get on your way," I said. "I want to talk to Doll. When

I'm through talking, you can come back."

Hennessy got to his feet just roaring. "Why you . . . !" he started, and then I stopped it. "Get out," I said. "All I've got to do is open my mouth and I'll have half a dozen M. P.'s over here. Then all I've got to say is that I think you two are the guys that killed George Shoreham. Get it?"

"You dirty ——!" said Sims. "You can't lay that on us."

"By the time you explain that you're in the clear to the Army, Mister," I said, "the Army'll have you in pieces all over the floor. George Shoreham may not have been such a wonder in the Army, but he was in it. The boys don't like what happened to him, and they'll work you over first and talk about it later. Catch wise?"

He said: "Come on, Three Star."

THE Higgins girl sobered up a lot with the first words I said to her, and she kept on going that direction the more I talked.

I said: "Look, sister, I'm a cop. I'm down here to hang this Shoreham killing on you. You tolled the kid here when you saw he had a bankroll, and you spotted him for your boy friends. I'm not local—I'm not interested in what the local boys do down here. I'm working for the dead guy's folks, and they've got money to throw away. They've got enough to put you away for life, if they want to go to bat on it."

She said: "Honest, Mister, I didn't have anything to do with that. Neither did Mickey or Hennessy."

"Were they here?"

"Why . . . ugh . . . why, yes."

I said: "It's all over but the trial. It'll surprise you what a lot of money can do when it comes to digging up evidence."

It was just conversation but I figured the timing was right. She'd certainly been pushed around by the local cops before being let out of jail. You can trust small-town cops to work over a gal when she's in a spot like this kid was. I figured they'd thrown a scare into her already, and that all I'd have to do was carry on with it. She'd think she was clear, once she was out of jail, and then to have more of the same pitched at her before she had a chance to rest, might do the trick.

And it did. She began to cry, and a lot of the soldier and sailor boys dancing by began to give me dirty looks. One of them even stopped and asked the gal if I was annoying her, but went away when he decided she had a crying jag.

"Did you know George?" she asked.

"No."

"He was nuts," said Doll.

"He was still murdered."

"Mickey didn't do it. Look, Mr. Drake."

"Sam's the name."

"I can't talk to you here. I can't talk to you when Mickey and Hennessy are watching."

They *were* watching us, too. Standing by the bar and never taking their eyes from us.

"Well?" I asked.

"Now look! I live in an auto court. The White Pines Auto Court. Know where it is?"

"I can find it."

"Come there. Say about two

o'clock. Mickey and Three Star will have gone, by then, and I can talk."

"Okay."

"Honest, Mr. Drake . . . I mean, Sam . . . this thing's got me down. The cops are raising hell with me. The chief told me he was going to give me a floater out of town, and I got no place to go. I . . . I been playing around some with Mickey, see, and that makes it bad, too. I'm afraid of Mickey. I don't know what to do. I just got in the middle on this thing."

I waved at Mickey and his Hennessy pal and stood up. "I'll see you at two," I said. "You better sober up before then—it don't do any good to talk to a drunken woman."

She said: "My cabin number's eleven."

FRANKIE and Johnny lived out behind their place in a trailer. I found that out and found that about half the workmen in the section lived that way. No accommodations, between all the extra defense work and with the Army and Navy there in force as well. And I'll say that a trailer, when it's fixed up, isn't a bad place at all to live.

The girls had a big one, and it was fitted up with half as a bedroom and the other half as a sort of sitting room. A sort of bar sitting room, if there's such a thing.

The three of us sat there, with first one of the girl's leaving to check business in the place and then the other. We were interrupted three times as well, when one of the help would come over and tell us there was an argument, and then both girls would leave and take care of the situation.

Between the M.P.s and the bouncer the house hired, trouble never got far. Finally, along about eleven, they said to hell with it and Johnny brought back her boy friend, a big guy named Jerry Thomas. Jerry, I gathered, was a steamfitter and not a professional ladies' man. And he knew all about what I was there for—had been in the place the night George Shoreham had been killed. He knew what Frankie and Johnny were facing on the mess as well as they did—and so I spoke right out in meeting.

WE WERE evenly divided on Doll Higgins. Both girls said she was a bum in spades and both Jerry Thomas and I thought the cops were giving her the business because she was handy. We took the stand that she was being abused—and the girls took the stand she deserved abuse.

I told them nothing about my two o'clock date.

We were sitting there, all chummy, all happy and bright and arguing whether the Doll girl was a bum. I had a highball glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other, and the rest of them were similarly laden.

And then the door opened and a man walked in behind as big a gun as I've ever seen in my life.

"Stand up!" he said.

We stood up. Holding to what we had in our hands. Not a chance in the world to go for a gun.

Another one followed the gunman in, another gunman. This one was holding a mail-order pistol as if he was afraid of it. The first man was tall and thin, with a mean-looking squint and with a nose that had been

broken and badly set. It was humped like the back of a camel. The second boy was pocked and his cheekbones and eyebrows were too thick. An ex-pug, without the shadow of a doubt. He was short and thick, and even figuring the extra weight he'd probably put on when he broke training, I thought he'd fought at least as a welter. A good-sized man.

Jerry Thomas growled: "Wha's this? A hold-up?"

Frankie said: "You dopes! The dough ain't here. We don't take off the damper until we put the place to bed, and then it goes down to the night bank with two special cops. We been held up before."

"Shut up!" said the first man.

"Yeah, shut up!" said his ex-pug pal.

"All you turn around," said the first.

We all turned around, still balancing the drinks and the cigarettes. There was nothing else to do, believe it.



HE ex-pug came in close and patted us over. He took some money from Jerry Thomas, some money and my gun from me, and he got a giggle from Frankie, when he patted her more than he needed to.

She said: "Aw, quit."

"Shut up!" he said.

"Fresh!"

"Now you shut up."

"Then quit. You don't have to pinch."

He was partly behind her and at her side. Also at my side, but level with me. I weaved a little, as if I was a little in the bag, and the tall

It wasn't until daylight
that they found him.



one that acted as if he knew what a gun was all about told me to stand quiet. He was behind me, of course; all I could hear was his voice.

I said: "Sure! I'm standing quiet."
And then to catch my balance I put a foot out and managed to come down on the ex-pug's instep.

He howled and dropped the gun he'd taken from me, as well as the money he'd taken from both Thomas and me. I had my weight on my foot, and it must have hurt him plenty. He snarled something then and stepped back, raising his damn' cheap gun to swing at me, and the thin partner said:

"No, Ike!"

Ike stopped. It was plain that the thin one wore the pants.

"You ain't going to get rich that way," Frankie said to Ike. "You can't put money by if you throw it on the floor."

"Dirty ——!" Ike told her.

The thin one said: "This is for you, Drake—it's no heist. Get out. You're not wanted. We'll handle our stuff down here. We don't want any outside talent hornin' in."

I said: "Mickey Sims got to you fast."

"To hell with you. Pick up his gun, Ike. Now, Drake, you stay here. Don't stick your puss out the door, or I'll take a shot at it."

"You're the doctor," I said.

Ike picked up my gun and they backed out. Then Frankie said: "Well, I'll be damned!"

I said: "I got to go now."

It was a little after twelve then.

Frankie said: "You can't do any good for yourself this late at night. Stick around; the party's just getting rough."

"I've got to go."

"Now look, Sam," she said. "You even haven't got a gun to work with. Let it go for tonight. You and I can have fun—Johnny's got a boy friend and that makes us evened up, don't it?"

I said: "I've got to go back to the

hotel and pick up my spare gun. I want to do it in a hurry, too."

"In that case I'll call a cab," she sighed. "Just promise me one thing."

"Sure."

"That you'll come back when this is over. That's all."

"Sure."

"You and I've got some unfinished business."

"Sure, hon."

"I've got an investment in you."

"I don't get that one."

"You dope," she said. "Haven't you got about five bucks worth of my liquor in you? I'm not putting out for nothing, dearie."

I told her I'd try to make good on what I owed.

HARRY SHOREHAM wasn't in the room, but I wasn't surprised. He'd been giving every girl we'd seen the bad eye, and I figured he was out doing the tom-cat act. He was a fool for women and whiskey, just like his half brother had been—and I'd known it from the first hour with him. I got my spare gun from my bag and put it in its clip and then went back to the waiting cab.

And had the cab let me off a full block from the White Pines Auto Court. I made the block in the shadow, circling around number eleven, but outside of a little light drifting out from behind a drawn shade, I didn't see a thing.

So I knocked and Doll Higgins let me in. She'd been crying, and either that or the jam she was in had sobered her completely.

I ducked inside the door so I wouldn't be outlined and she looked at me as if I were crazy.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

I told her—told her what had happened at Frankie and Johnny's.

She said: "Mickey didn't have a thing to do with that. If he wanted you out, he'd have told you himself. He isn't tongue-tied."

"He's not laying himself wide open, either. If he'd told me himself, that's what he'd have been doing."

She said: "Sit down," and motioned me to a ratty-looking couch. She brought out whiskey and apologized for having no ice or soda, but I told her I could go for it without a chaser.

So could she, it seemed.

Then she said: "I'm going to give it to you straight. Mickey'd beat the hell out of me if he knew it, but it's our only out. If I don't give you the right of it, you'll frame us. After this warning business, I know damn' well you would."

"I don't like that," I said. "I'll go when I get ready, and you can tell Mickey I said so. He didn't take the only gun in the world away from me."

"Now listen," she said. "Mickey sapped the kid, all right, but that's all he did. And that's what he was supposed to do."

"Hunh!"

"I'm giving it to you straight. He and Three Star were supposed to do it. It was all arranged."

"Who by?"

"By the kid, of course. Mickey's going to beat hell out of me for telling you, but I'm going to tell, anyway. I'm not going to have you pushing me around on top of the cops pushing me around. It's just too much it's driving me crazy and I can't stand it."

BETWEEN being afraid of Mickey and being afraid of the cops and being afraid of me she was getting jittery. I put my arm around her to calm her down and it was no hardship at all. She was a chubby little wench, not over twenty, and while she was as hard-boiled as they come, she didn't look it. She had a round baby-face that went just fine with her round little figure, and the combination wasn't hard to take.

"Nobody's going to push you around, honey," I said. "At least if anybody does, it'll be me, and you won't mind it so much."

She put her head down against my shoulder and kept on talking from there.

"This George Shoreham was goofy," she said. "He always had a lot of dough, and all he could think about was getting his name in the papers. That's why he enlisted—all the talk about a rich man joining up as a private when he could have waited and tried for a commission. You know how he was?"

"I've heard."

"A publicity hound, that's what he was. Well, after he got in, the papers forgot him. He couldn't stand it—it was driving him nuts. So he got me to introduce him to Mickey and Three Star. I was just playing him before then, see. He didn't know I was really going with Mickey. Then he asked Mickey to tunk him on the head, easy, so he could go to the cops and claim he'd been knocked out and robbed. It would have put him back in the papers. It would have reminded them of him again."

"Sounds crazy."

She sighed and nestled closer and

said: "I know it. But it's straight. He was going to tell the cops that he got rolled for almost three grand, but all he had on him was two hundred and something. Mickey and Three Star were to keep that for clunking him."

"Go on."

"Well, they did. Mickey sapped him and rolled him and then he and Three Star came back inside. By and by, when the kid didn't show up, they went outside to see how he was making out. Just out of kindness, you might say. And there he was for good. Some — had taken a piece of pipe that was there and had just knocked his head in with it."

"Mickey probably sapped him too hard."

She said indignantly: "Mickey don't sap 'em too hard. He's an artist with that sap, Sam, and I don't mean perhaps. No sir! He left him there with a little bump on the jaw and he went back and found him with his head smashed in. Why should he lie to me?"

BY THIS time she was almost in my lap and getting closer every minute. I could see her angle—she was trying to make friends with me in the best way she could. So I let her cuddle and thought it over. Her story was so dizzy it made sense. If Mickey Sims had killed the kid, he certainly wouldn't have been admitting to her that he'd sapped him. He'd have claimed he'd changed his mind about going through with the proposition. And there was no reason for him sending anybody to me with a warning to get out of town. He was able to do that himself, if I was any judge.

And his muscle, big Hennessy, would have done it if Sims hadn't wanted to. Hennessy was stupid enough to warn the chief-of-police out, if Sims had told him to do it.

It boiled down to the old, old reason. Murder for gain was the only motive that would stand up, and Sims and Hennessy couldn't gain a thing by that particular murder. All they could get was what was in the guy's pockets and they'd taken that. There was no reason for them to kill him and every reason why they shouldn't.

I said: "Well, thanks, Doll. I'll go now. I've got to send a night letter."

She moved in closer and said: "A day letter would get there just about as fast. Look, Sam, I'm scared. After it's over, I'll be all right but I'm scared now. Mickey'll beat hell out of me if he should come around."

I said: "I'll look after you."



HARRY SHOREHAM was just coming in when I got back to the hotel after sending my day letter. He came in a little drunk, with the cat-that-ate-the-canary expression and he must have caught the same look on my face.

"You had a time for yourself, too," he said.

"Sort of," I told him.

"This is a swell town. A man can get out here and play around without running into a lot of people that you know."

"Where'd you go?"

He winked and said: "The Regent Hotel."

It was a tip-off. If he'd been a rounder, he could have dug up a

joint like that in no time at all, but he was a nice boy. Or supposed to be one, anyway. Nice boys can't put their nice little fingers on the hot spots, not like that. I watched him go to bed and then went out and down to the station, and I caught the chief just going into his office. And introduced myself and told him what I wanted.

"It'll be at the Regent Hotel," I said. "I want a thin, mean-looking bird with a squint. I don't know his name, but he's a pal of a plug-ugly named Ike. This Ike's an ex-fighter. I can identify 'em, all right, but I don't want to go along with the raid if I can keep from it."

The chief asked why not and pointed out, very reasonably, that I was the one making the charge and therefore should be sure the cops picked up the right parties.

I said: "There'll be some noise and some confusion and somebody might see me. I might have been pointed out, anything like that. I can't take a chance on having the guy I really want tipped off. I want to pick him last."

The chief shrugged and said it was always a pleasure to pick up Ike Mors and Pinky Innis, which was who the thin man would be. He said they picked up that pair at least once a month, but never could hold them long enough to do anybody any good. That the two of them were hoodlums but that proving they were was a tough thing to do.

I said: "Well, you'll have 'em out of your hair from here on now," and went back to the telegraph office.

And there it was—the only answer to the whole thing.

I didn't even bother to go back to

the station, but picked a beat man to go along with me and make the arrest.

Harry Shoreham was flat on his back and snoring and the first he knew about the thing was when I got him by an ankle and yanked him out on the floor. He woke up and the cop told him, very properly.

"You're under arrest for murder, Mister," he said.

Harry goggled at me. "Wha's this?"

I said: "The officer is right. The two boys you hired to kill your half brother are down at the station."

THAT was all there was to it. The answer was there, right from the start. George, the boy that had been murdered, had money left to him from his mother. A lot of it. He naturally wouldn't leave it to his dad, who didn't need it. His old man had dollars where he had dimes. He could have given it to some stranger, but that didn't make sense. He'd leave it to some of the family . . . and if it wasn't his father it would be his half-brother or his step-mother.

He'd split it between them, it so happened. His half-brother Harry followed him down to where he was stationed and learned about the dizzy kid's publicity idea. Of how the kid was going to let himself be knocked out and robbed, to get back in the papers. The kid would be proud of the idea and would brag about it. Harry just hired Ike Mors and Pinky Innis to carry on from the fake knockout and robbery, and there he was with a fortune in his hand.

(Continued on page 125)



*He wanted to marry June,
without losing Merry! He
wanted to have his cake and
eat it, too, and he should
have known better!*

By
**LARRY
DUNN**



RADFORD held the rim of the thin wine glass tight against the wall. Its long-stemmed base was pressed to his ear. That way it was as efficient as a stethoscope applied to a man's breast.

*She was breathing,
he could see, but
she would be out
for some time.*



SHE LOVED TO MURDER

Only Bradford wasn't listening to the kind of heart murmur that would interest a doctor. He could hear distinctly the low voices of the girl and the man in the adjoining room. The conversation had to do with non-physical "heart murmurs."

Bill Bradford was a lot of hard muscle and bone to be listed professionally as a "love detective." That was his own rating, however, and it paid off. Former pals, still in the newspaper police reporting game, referred to it as snooping.

"How's the Snoop today?" was a common salutation that should

have burned Bradford, for he was anything but a divorce dick.

Brad could afford to grin and take it. He felt he was doing a lot of good in the world.

Cautious Pops and Moms came to him. He checked up for them on dubious suitors for their wandering daughters. Moms of glamor girls (they hoped) were his steadiest and best paying clients.

Back to the wine glass heart-detector. Bradford pulled it away quick-

ly. His scowl cut a furrow between his gray eyes. June Lake, the golden pretty in the adjoining room, seemed to be establishing definitely that she was all-out all ways for Clyde Winton.

The murmurs he had heard appeared to prove that all was very cozy between the little gal and the prematurely (perhaps) bald-headed Big Shot from down the coast. This being so, it was an easy grand, plus expenses, for Brad.

"Now, darling, or any time—you don't have to wait—you make it seem as if I didn't trust you, even bringing it up—"

That had been little June's murmur, cooing through the wine glass detector. (Try it some time.)

"I will then—you'll never know how damn' much it means—we will be married, honey—just a little time first to get the family out of the notion of having a daughter who doesn't rate the Blue Book."

Clyde Winton's low-pitched, emotional voice said that. Brad had always disliked men with emotional voices. He discovered now that he had been disliking Winton more and more during the past two weeks.

Sure, Winton was his client. There had to be a check-up to satisfy the snobbish Wintons that little June Lake hadn't somehow been spawned through the mating of some convict with a careless lady of the streets. The worst Bradford had found was that June's immediate ancestors had soaked their shirts with sweat by working for their living, which was almost as bad, but could be forgiven or at least partly forgotten. Especially since June Lake rated half a million.

Anyway, June Lake had come here to the small, obscure hotel to meet Clyde Winton for a final understanding. Winton had put it that way. Bradford had arranged it.

AND now big Bill Bradford was suddenly as sick as all hell about it. He had taken an adjoining room to convince himself this was the real McCoy on June's part for Clyde Winton. Neither June nor Winton knew that Bradford had engaged this "listening" room for himself.

For somewhere along the line, since he had taken this case, Bradford had been learning something about himself. He had found out that one *love detective*, commonly known as the Snoop, had halfway set himself to double-cross a legitimate client. Only June Lake's dough blocked him. He didn't want any part of it.

Exactly a week ago, having been frequently with June Lake simply as a man she had met at the beach, Bradford had discovered he was all the way up to his over-sized ears in love with the little girl.

And but two days before this time and minute, along had come golden opportunity and deadly temptation to put the kibosh on the planned June Lake and Clyde Winton alliance. Learning of his connection with Winton, another pretty, of a sleeker and much more experienced type than little June, had sought him out.

Putting it straight, she had propositioned him on a little side play involving Winton, the Big Shot.

Maryland (Merry) Arnold had come right out with an unblushing

true confession. It seemed, as she had told it, the cautious Clyde of the so circumspect and stuffed shirt Wintons, was looking forward, hopefully, to a future double life. June for her dough. Merry for the polly old hell of it.

"June Lake's the kind of a doll he can put on the family sideboard," was Merry Arnold's story to Bradford. "But he hasn't any idea of tossing away such an old and close friend as myself. Now I'm not one to toy with the idea of slitting little June's lovely, white throat, and I want her to be happy."

That was the way Merry Arnold had put it up to Bradford. And he had figured how nice it would be to have all of this spilled to June Lake. All to the good, the way his own emotions were running away with any conscientious scruples he might have had.

But the way had been made smoother for him than that. Practical Merry Arnold, it seemed, always looked out for herself.

"It's been a nice show with Winton while it lasted," she had said. "But with his darling June for home and family consumption, dear Clyde hasn't the slightest intention of brushing off his good and faithful Merry. Nor does he mean to be brushed off, wedding bells or whatever. And there's another little man with a little million or more who wants to put a ring on little Merry's finger, having no idea of her little affair with Winton."

Then Bill Bradford had more than bent the old ear. For in order to free herself, Merry Arnold had, wisely or unwisely, decided that she must make it clear to Clyde Winton

that he was not unique in being a man, or in her life. Bradford could act as "the other man."

"Five nice, new centuries for putting on the act, Bradford," had been Merry's out-and-out proposal. "It's not outside your line as a love detective, and it adds to the old income. Little June gets her Clyde, mad as hell after he discovers, as he'll think, that I'm two-timing him, but free and clear of all encumbrances so far as I'm concerned."

To be sure, considered Bradford, the clever Merry might have passed up the proposition and her little story, if she could have known the off trick his own heart had played him with June Lake.

But what the hell? Five centuries added to half a grand. And it might so happen he could pull a wholly unexpected rabbit out of this double-crossing bag of tricks. Then again, his conscience had got him cold.

If June Lake really was all-out that way for Winton, it was his duty to see that Merry Arnold cleared out of Winton's life. This at least would give the little girl that much of a break when a Winton wedding ring insured her future.

Well, big Bill Bradford had been juggling the thought of what best to do. And it had come right down to convincing himself that June Lake was one hundred per cent for the bald-headed scion of sin who happened to be his client.

HE HAD that assurance now. He wished to hell he hadn't pulled the old wine glass trick of listening in on the adjoining room. He judged it would be smart to fade out now; then, meet Clyde Winton later for

the final settlement of his fee and expenses.

His long fingers crushed the detecting wine glass. He failed to feel the pain when the glass cut his hand. His imagination was too vivid concerning the finale of the little scene of meeting for last arrangements, he had planned at Winton's request.

He was burning over Winton's saying it would take a little time to accustom his family to the idea of his marrying June Lake.

"I'm nuts!" he muttered savagely. "June's fixed up nicely. I'll collect the Winton fee, four centuries for expenses, and give Merry Arnold a break for the half a grand she wants to toss away. It'll be worth playing it that way all free for nothing, just to see Clyde Winton when he imagines I have been having fun with the other half of the double love life he has framed for himself."

Bradford was ready to leave, to get out from under. He had withstood the tough temptation to put a few wrong-tailed monkeys in the June Lake family tree at the last minute. He had certified the Lakes as American Class A-1, which was more than he could have done for many of the split syllable names in the current Blue Book.

"I'll still have a clean record; I'll get rid of Winton's friend Merry for June; and June will never know the kind of an ape she's getting along with a family," he murmured.

Little June's evidently unlimited ardor for Winton made his decision grim. He permitted the shattered bits of wine glass to slip through his relaxing fingers.

"Anyway, I haven't double-crossed my client," he said softly.

"I'm really about to do June a favor before I wipe the whole Like-Winton case off the books. Only I'm not sure it won't be pulling the double-X on June herself."

"WHEN the one and only love sleuth's alone, what does he talk about?" murmured a husky, mocking voice behind him. "And why bust up a good wine glass just to show how strong you are?"

"Nice gals always knock when they walk into rooms," said Bradford, facing Merry Arnold.

"Good detectives, even for love, are smart enough to lock their doors," and Merry yawned just enough to reveal a sweet, white V that wasn't exactly for victory, under her rounded chin. "If you haven't made up your mind, I've come along to decide for you, Bradford. I've been keeping the eyes open, and the ears in tune, and my darling Winton has a golf reservation for the Pinelpa Hotel tonight. I've also learned that dear, little June is going from here to visit with an Uncle Bob and Aunt Della up in the country as soon as they—as soon as she leaves here. June and I have become good friends without her knowing too much."

Bradford was bitter. He took in Merry's shapely person, and he decided that Winton hadn't been doing so badly before he had met June Lake. Not that he cared for her kind of green eyes, or the burnished saffron yellow hair the blonde Merry had fluffed about her ears.

"You're taking it for granted I'll play along, huh?" he said.

"And what's wrong about that, Snoop?" she mocked, applying the

name he hated. "You're honest." She slid into a chair and extended one, curving leg until the nicely rounded knee appeared. "Don't you owe it to June Lake to help me get Winton out of my life? You've checked on her for a price, but—"

"Shut up!" said Bradford grimly. "What I'm doing will be for five centuries, baby. I judge you have some thought of the Pinelpa Hotel

It seemed impossible that she could have such cat-like almost brutal, strength.



as a trysting place, sweetheart? It happens to rate too much on the up and up to be pulling that kind of double time. Any other ideas?"

Movement could be heard in the adjoining room.

"It's still the Pinelpa, Bradford," breathed Merry. "Don't you get it? Darling Winton will be tipped off."

He will be put in the way of hearing and seeing plenty, but he won't dare let out a squawk. Not at the Pinelpa. Not a Winton."

Bradford could see that angle. But he had a thought for Merry herself.

"Did you think he might backfire?" said Bradford. "You sure he would drop you cold, instead of maybe leaving you cold and very dead, Merry?"

Her green eyes glittered. The heaving of her bosom was something worth watching, even if Brad didn't go for her type.

"Clyde Winton's pride is bigger than his heart or his soul," she said. "All he needs is to find out that he isn't all the aces there are. He would go through hell rather than let anyone know he had stubbed his toe over a woman anywhere, at any time. Isn't that why he hired the only known love detective to check up on June Lake?"

Bradford saw that. He said, "What's the setup then?"

"You breeze from here and get going to Pinelpa," she said. "I will come along later. Register under your own name. Stay in your rooms an hour. I have it all figured out. Happy loving, Brad."



BIG BILL BRADFORD could see the Pinelpa golf links, the winding saddle path, and one of the salt water plunges in the white moonlight. He had been waiting in his fourth floor suite half an hour.

"Whose family tree you chopping down now?" had been the greeting of Enders, part owner and manager of the million-dollar, swanky Pinelpa. "There's always a big wedding

in the wind when you show up."

Brad had grinned a little and said nothing. Scandal in the making would have turned Enders gray-headed.

Brad had been watching the lighted driveway. Merry Arnold had arrived a few minutes before. Her coupé had been parked in the big circle. Brad had not seen Merry, but her light laugh as she spoke to someone was unmistakable.

"In another few minutes I'm due to become a total heel," muttered Brad. "Should back out while there's time. But what the glory hell? It'll be doing June Lake a favor."

A big car swung into the driveway. Brad heard Clyde Winton's nasal, top-tone voice. He was directing luggage unloaded. All within hearing knew when the Winton's arrived.

"An' take it right up to four-eight-nine!"

Brad grunted and grinned to himself. He had four-eight-six, almost across the corridor. Not that it mattered. Very soon he was keeping a date with a lady. He judged Merry would have a suite. She was still throwing Winton's dough around, he guessed.

Glancing from the window, he noticed that a man walked over, passing by the parked cars. Moonlight showed a bald dome, even four floors down.

"If he's seen Merry's car?" mused Brad. "But perhaps she intended it that way. It's well for Bill Bradford, love dick, that he's a Winton, and THIS IS the Pinelpa."

He expected a phone buzz any time now. Instead, a discreet rap

came on his door. Merry was there, a blue raincoat around her. It was partly drawn up, concealing her face.

"Switchboard girls are noseys," she said quickly. "I used the fire stairs. Come to three-seven-nine in five minutes. The stairs are best. I'll be waiting. A little later darling Clyde will see you leave my suite when he answers a mysterious call."

"That'll be just fine," grunted Brad. "And you?"

Merry smiled a little. Her mouth was curved and sweet. Yet the lips took on a sardonic twist.

"Dear Clyde will just have a glimpse of me at my door, and that will be all," she said. "I'll wager another century he'll not even mention it to you later, or to me either. That will be that."

Brad had a brief glimpse of a creamy white leg, a flash of a rounded thigh, as Merry turned to hurry back along the corridor. It rather took his breath. If she were to be seen like that here in the sacrosanct Pinelpa, Enders would die of apoplexy.

Brad listened, waiting. He heard Clyde Winton come up, enter his room, his nasal voice intended to impress a bellhop. Winton's door closed. The bellhop went away. The elevator whined.

COMING from the fire stairs door on the third floor, Brad had the sudden sense he was being watched. It seemed that a dark shadow at the end of the corridor had moved. He kept on steadily, however, walking directly toward the spot.

There was only a blowing drape, a French window partly open, and a fire escape platform outside.

He saw no one on the platform.

"The old guilty flee and all that," he murmured. "You'd think I was really going to town with my paying client."

The corridor was empty. The door of three-seven-nine opened immediately. The parlor of the suite appeared exotic under soft, yellow lights. It made the golden saffron hair of Merry seem more like a halo.

"A golddigger's halo," muttered Brad. "But the gal has something at that."

Shades were tightly drawn. Merry looked at Brad, a mocking smile curving her lips. The V for victory, not virtue, was more extended than in the afternoon.

"A love detective should know the answers," said Merry huskily. "Don't tell me you are so purely commercial you can't like me a little."

Her arms dropped and the robe serving as a negligee slid off her rounded shoulders. Her head was slightly tilted, and she smiled up at Brad.

"Hell, Merry!" He grumped with some effort. "Do we have to put on a show behind the curtain. This was to be a front stage act, remember?"

"I guess you really don't like me," sighed Merry, turning from him with a provocative swaying of her slender, white back.

Even a love detective is human. Brad attempted to take his fascinated gaze off the dainty, doll-like figure. Merry didn't seem nearly so tall, and not at all as hardboiled as he knew her to be, walking with a little lift over to the mirror.

Something gave Brad a sudden, vague sense of danger. He had the feeling of having seen some of the things in this room before. He had it now. The silken bathrobe Merry had dropped in a heap on the floor.

The robe was the same as June Lake had worn when he had first met her at a beach swimming pool. Well, it had to be a coincidence, but it did look the same. He supposed there were thousands of blue robes.

He was thinking of the shadow he had suspected in the corridor. Then Merry had turned back to him. Again, for a fleeting second, her burnished saffron hair reminded him of June Lake.

"Dammitall!" he grated. "I have June on my mind. To be sure they have the same color of hair, only June's is natural."

One view in the mirror, the other view being Merry herself, Brad had to admit that Winton could not be censored too much for wanting to keep his double life. He was sure that Merry had arranged for what happened, that her toe had probably pulled loose a connecting cord.

The room was plunged in darkness, except for the moonlight at the broad French windows. Merry gave a husky, little cry. Then she was in his arms.

"Brad, darling, we only live once," she breathed softly. "It's my show, isn't it?"

Her parted lips were upon his mouth. Her bare, warm arms encircled his neck. He tried to keep thinking she was staging this whole show. But even his effort to hang onto the mercenary thought that she might be playing to save herself five centuries failed.

"Brad, please, I've been so unhappy—"

That at least he could believe. His arms wanted to comfort her even if his cold, common sense still warned him of some intangible danger. Then his hands slipped along the slender, back and her body quivered close to him—

A minute, two minutes, it didn't matter.

His eyes were upon the white moonlight against the broad, low windows. This time, there could be no mistake. The shadow he saw was the outline of a man's figure.

At the moment, Merry Arnold was stretched lazily upon the divan near the center of the room. As her hands raised above her head in a relaxing gesture, her sigh of contentment was natural.

One hand struck from that position over her head. It seemed impossible she could possess such cat-like, almost brutal strength. It might have been a heavy, metal ball or some other weighty, hard object.

The smash between Brad's eyes was as if his skull had exploded from the inside. He had been looking at the human shadow against the French window.

MOONLIGHT still flooded the French window. Seeping blood was salty in big Bill Bradford's mouth. He must have been a full minute coming to full consciousness.

The room was still in darkness. Brad lay still, listening. He could hear regular, deep breathing, a soft sound as from a woman's lips. It was so close that when he reached over, he touched bare, warm flesh, and it was a rounded arm.

"Merry?"

There was no response. Brad's head whirled. His lips were split when he put his hand to his salty mouth. One eye stayed queerly shut, and it was swollen.

"That's for June," he said, and she went cold under his fast punch.



Brad came to his feet. He was too cautious to seek a light switch at once. An oppressive feeling of some other presence was heavy upon him. It came to him that it had been Merry who had knocked him out with some weapon or weight she must have had ready in the divan.

His cigarette lighter clicked. He shielded the light with his hands. And hard, bitter oaths stopped just inside his teeth.

"June?"

He was looking at June Lake's

golden hair and her delicate, oval features. She lay upon the thick softness of a brown, bearskin rug beside him.

The firm, young bosom arose and fell with her steady, natural breathing. The completeness of her sleep bespoke some powerful sedative. But when it came to explaining, that would get only a skeptical laugh.

Brad could but guess how long he had been out cold. He judged it could have been but a short time.

"The damn', no-good tramp!" He had never been more bitter. "Her next move will be to have someone, presumably Winton, come to this room. By hell! That's her play. I'm the prize sucker of the century. She had no intention of giving up Winton, and all this is perfect—"

He was on his feet now, thinking fast. A dread premonition came with sharp recollection. There had been someone outside that French window on the fire escape platform. Merry might have had an accomplice. Or—

A blazing thought came to him.

Could it have been Clyde Winton? Had Winton seen Merry's car and have checked on her room. Or had Winton seen him leave the fourth floor?

Strange that Merry should wait so long before creating some sort of an alarm?

"I must get June out of here," he said grimly. "Damn' that smart Jezebel! She had her asleep in the bedroom all the time. Well, if I can make down the fire escape—"

He did not dare risk a light. Finding the bedroom door, he groped his way in, ready to use his cigarette

lighter as a flash. He stepped on something soft, stumbled and half fell.

THE coarse texture of cloth, short hair, and a roughly bearded face touched his seeking hands. There was no breath, no pulse in the man. Brad risked the lighter again.

By the hair, he knew the man probably had come from prison but a short time before. He was free now, his dead eyes staring without sight. His clothes were rough, like prison make.

But what held Brad longest were the two imprints like thumb marks and the bruised line around the man's thick throat. It seemed as if the dead man had been strangled from behind by some powerful killer, who had pressed his thumbs against his larynx.

Yet there was a cut and bleeding contusion at the back of the head, just above the neck line.

"A woman wouldn't have had the strength to choke him like that," said Brad quickly. "Or even to leave the thumb marks after he had been knocked out. Which may put Bill Bradford right behind the well known eight ball."

His brain seemed to be tied in a knot. Removing June Lake became of first importance. He knew now why there had not been an alarm, or thought he did.

Perhaps Merry's little game of loving double-cross had not included murder. That had come unexpectedly. Possibly then Merry had to be smart enough to permit discovery to be more casual than she had intended. Merry, if guilty, must try to build up an alibi.

Or would she send Clyde Winton in upon this as it was?

The telephone in the parlor sent a chill through Brad. He risked a full light briefly. The first thing he saw was the blue bathrobe. He was convinced now it belonged to June. No doubt Merry had intended to be seen briefly by Clyde Winton in that robe.

He was aware now that some other objects, some jewelry in the parlor had been familiar. They had belonged to June Lake.

The telephone kept buzzing insistently. He could find but the bathrobe. With this he got back to June. She was still sleeping under the drug. He wrapped it about her, and then he became aware of something missing, that he needed to secure the robe.

He recalled the thick silken cord that had been about the robe when Merry had dropped it from her shoulders. Although the phone was still buzzing, Brad was back beside the corpse.

He held a skin magnifying mirror taken from a toilet set on the dresser. Swift scrutiny of the dead man's real death wound, the marks of strangling after he had been knocked out, and then Brad was moving fast.

The phone quit buzzing. Someone might be coming to the door now. He wished he had time to search for that bathrobe cord, but he had much less than an even chance of getting June out of this.

Perhaps Merry would be smart enough to watch outside. He had to chance that. He went over and made sure the door was unlocked.

With the robe around June Lake,

Brad went up instead of down the fire escape. The iron ladder to the roof at the fifth floor was tough, but he shouldered June's light, limp body and managed it.

"If you'll only stay asleep," he said softly, and he kissed the girl's parted, quiet lips.

June did not stir when he put her down and left her.

Brad saw a skylight and went down that way removing a pane and unlocking the trapdoor.

He gained the fifth floor by the ladder, and the fourth by the fire stairs. It was a game of guessing now. Of trying to outsmart Merry Arnold, or perhaps Clyde Winton.

He was handicapped by ignorance of the circumstances. Could the corpse have been in the bedroom when he first entered?

Or was the dead man the same one who had been spying through the French window? Winton had perhaps identified a parked car.

In another minute he might know that. -Clyde Winton had to be the answer. Winton might even be the killer?

CLYDE WINTON responded to his door buzzer. Bradford kept his face partly averted, getting a good view of the bald-headed scion of the big book family.

"Bradford?" exclaimed Winton. "You here? Why didn't you let me know?"

Winton's slight surprise might have been assumed. His whole manner was that of a man who was disturbed by something, but not by anything as serious as murder. His tone was impatient, but in one item Bradford had made a mistake.. Winton

proved it, before he had a good look at Brad's face. He knew June was here.

"I'm glad you've come, anyway, Bradford," he said. "That may account for June being here, too. She told me she intended visiting an aunt and uncle when she left today. Has something come up?"

Brad's ears were strained, listening for any sound of alarm in the building, from the floor below. There was none. Then his somewhat clogged brain functioned clearly.

"Yes, June Lake is here," he said. "I would have seen you sooner, Winton, but a car backed into me and smacked me up a bit."

He touched his swollen eye and his split lips.

"Say, man!" Winton was considerate. "Hadn't you better have a doctor look at that?"

"I will, Winton," promised Brad. "But first, I've come onto something too important to wait. I'm sorry, but for once I almost missed fire on a case. I just found out late today that June Lake hasn't the small fortune she has been credited with. That money from an uncle went to another cousin who, by coincidence, also is named June Lake."

Brad was almost glad he was in this jam. The oath slipping from Winton's hardening mouth told him a whole story.

"You're sure, Bradford? You have proof she has been running a phony, putting on an act to steal the Winton name for herself?"

Brad never had wanted more to sock another man. But it could wait, just for another two or three minutes, if he had luck.

"That's right, Winton," he said. "The proof's down in June's room. Forget your coat and come along. I'll show you."

"This is terrible! That's what a man gets for taking up with any little tramp with a pretty face and a cute figure! I'm old enough to have known better!"

Brad was forced to clench his teeth, to dig his fingernails into his palms. The great Winton was closing his door behind him, still muttering. Brad hoped he could hold back until they reached that murder room downstairs, if they could do it without being discovered.

Just where was Merry Arnold? Who had been ringing that phone?

"I knew June Lake was here when I saw her car parked downstairs," went on Winton, behind him.

That added another angle to Merry's little game. She had come up here in June's car. She had in every way made sure that Winton should discover that June Lake was supposedly keeping a tryst with Bill Bradford. That was why she had become June's friend.

But where did the corpse fit into the picture?

Would Merry be watching to see who might enter the murder room?

Brad had an inspiration. The fire escape platforms crossed the end of the corridors and passed around to the windows of rooms.

Restraining his impulse to slap Winton down, Brad suddenly caught his arm. He didn't like to do this to June Lake, but it was a necessary evil right now.

"Come to think of it, Winton," he said. "If you'll come down the fire escape with me, perhaps you'll

find out that June Lake is even worse than you would believe. Right now, I judge she has company in her room."

"Yes? Let's go that way then!"

The avid eagerness in Winton's voice almost got him his well deserved sock there and then.

"WHAT is all this, Bradford?" exclaimed Clyde Winton, staring at the empty parlor as Brad flicked on the lights. "This is June's room, all right, by the perfume. But where is she?"

They had entered by the window from the fire escape.

Winton turned his smooth face with his rather roundish chin to exactly the right position. Brad tried to put every ounce of his one hundred and eighty pounds behind a straight punch.

"Aw'f'f'k!" was all Winton uttered as he collapsed.

Brad's whole arm tingled. Winton would be quiet for several long counts. Brad's eyes were upon the door he had left unlocked. He had Winton's inert body laid out in a crumpled heap close to the corpse in the bedroom when the telephone almost jumped him out of his skin.

He made a shrewd guess now. The phone had been ringing before. Could it be that sweet Merry Arnold was herself establishing an alibi? If she had intended it to appear that June Lake was keeping a tryst with him, then perhaps she had registered June Lake and herself in separate rooms?

Brad sprang to the door and relocked it. He picked up a bottle of Scotch, purposely spilling some of it on the rug. Then he left the over-

turned bottle there, after making sure he had his own flask of Scotch in his pocket.

Ten seconds later he carefully poured some sticky, scarlet nail polish from a little bottle on the dresser onto his handkerchief. He replaced the bottle as it had been.

The phone had quit ringing again. This time he judged there would be quick discovery. He switched off the lights and went back up the fire escape to the roof, listening as he moved.

As he climbed over the ledge, he heard men's raised voices below. One was the outraged voice of Enders. Brad grinned to himself then.

Enders was thinking of but one thing.

"How—how could they do this to us?" he was screeching.

That any man could be so inconsiderate as to have himself murdered in the exclusive Pinelpa was more than Enders could bear up under.

"Sorry, June, but I have to take a long chance on your reputation now," he said softly to the sleeping girl. "Here's hoping they keep their hullabaloo on the third floor a few minutes."

He got June down the skylight ladder and carried her by the fire stairs to the fourth floor. He made his own room without being observed.

Little June was tucked under the covers when Brad made a call to the desk. The clerk on duty was gasping, but he could talk.

Yes, a Miss June Lake was registered alone in three-seven-nine, and a Miss Merry Arnold had five-three-six, on the fifth floor, and, "For heaven's sake, haven't you heard,

Mr. Bradford? There's been an awful murder in Miss Lake's room, and Miss Lake is missing, and—"

"Nearly all murders are awful," cut in Brad, ending that.

He employed his handkerchief a few seconds, where it was still sticky with scarlet nail polish. Then he turned out the room light, locked his door softly and went down the fire stairs to the third floor. He carried June's bathrobe, soaked with liquor from his own flask and touched up with red nail polish.

THE doorway of three-seven-nine was crowded. More persons were arriving from the elevator. Brad was just in time to see Merry Arnold, wearing an evening dress and accompanied by an older woman, making her way through the little crowd into the murder rooms. Brad reached the doorway just in time. He heard Merry's cool and assured voice. He had to admire that kind of ice water for blood.

"What has happened?" inquired Merry. "Is my friend, June Lake, hurt? I've been calling the past half hour, and then I sent a bellboy."

Salter, the house dick, apparently knew this ended his job with the Pinelpa.

"If you're her friend," said Salter gruffly, "then perhaps you'll know where she is, how this mug got himself killed, and why Mr. Winton was fighting with him?"

Brad heard Merry's gasp of, "Clyde?"

He kept several persons between him and Merry, as he saw the blood drain from her face. Then she had control of herself.

"For heaven's sake, how would I

know about this?" she said. "I left June an hour ago, and I've been having dinner with Mrs. Cornelia. You know Mrs. Cornelia? But—"

Evidently Merry had chosen her course.

"I've never met Mr. Winton," she said. "I knew June was expecting a visitor, well, a man, but—"

At that moment Winton opened his eyes dazedly. He appeared to see Merry first, and he exclaimed, "Merry? You here? Where are we—oh—what—?"

Brad saw Winton's clearing eyes were upon the corpse.

"So you never met Mr. Winton, Miss Arnold?" snapped out Detective Salter. "You're registered as Miss Merry Arnold. Mr. Winton must have access to our register file."

"Well, I do know Mr. Winton then," and Merry was upset. "But that hasn't—"

Salter pursued his advantage very quickly.

"Never mind that!" he said quickly. "Winton, why did you choke this fellow to death, after apparently hitting him on the head with something? I get it! He was a holdup maybe, and you—"

Winton's words broke through his hard swallowing.

"I wasn't here—June Lake was—no—we came down the fire escape—and then—"

Merry Arnold was quick.

"You mean you heard trouble and came down, Mr. Winton?" she said, and Brad saw she was trying to steer him right or shut him up temporarily.

"No, Merry—no—I was told June Lake was with a man and—"

"And so you busted in and there

was a fight?" interrupted Salter. "You choked this guy to death, then someone knocked you out, Mr. Winton?"

At that, Brad saw that both Winton and Merry Arnold were at a dead end. Neither could come out with the truth, Winton being in the dark about it all, and Merry showing she was desperately anxious to clear Winton, yet keep herself out of it.

Brad maneuvered himself into a corner of the bedroom without either Winton or Merry seeing him. He spoke quietly from that spot.

"Winton could not have done it," he said. "June Lake saw it happen and ran out. She knew I was here and she came directly to my room. She saw a woman kill this man on the floor. June said that the woman knocked him down from behind, then jerked the cord out of June's bathrobe and used it to strangle him with, after tying two knots in it to make it look like prints of a man's thumbs."

Brad tossed the blue bathrobe over several persons to Salter. Winton was staring at Merry. He was too anxious to get out from under.

"Merry?" exclaimed Winton. "When you worked for me, you said your husband was in prison, a convict, and this fellow looks like—"

Merry screamed then.

"Why, you damn', yellow two-timer! You tryin' to put this on me? I'd say you framed this with that snoop, Bradford! It's a damn' lie, because June Lake was drugged and

couldn't talk — she — why, she loaned you nearly all of her money for your plant—"

"I think that about does it, Salter," said Bradford. "And if you'll notice closely, you'll see where liquor was spilled on June Lake's bathrobe from the bottle on the floor, as she told me. The alcohol dissolved some of Merry Arnold's scarlet nail polish, and it's plainly marked on the robe where the strangling belt was pulled out. You see—"

BRAD sidestepped just in time. Merry had instinctively lifted her hands, staring at her scarlet fingernails. In a flash she had snatched a toy automatic from her bosom and fired.

Brad felt the powder burn. His knuckles tingled from Merry Arnold's rounded chin as she went down cold under his fast punch.

"That's for June Lake," he said under his breath.

Clyde Winton was staring at him, his mouth opening and shutting, but no sound coming out of it. Brad grinned at him. This was due to be a tough spot for a Winton when the story hit the headlines.

Brad turned and started back to the fourth floor. So June had only been talking about a loan to Winton when they had been alone in that other hotel room. That made him feel a lot better over having had to double-cross a client, and lose one whole grand.

Wouldn't June be surprised when she woke up?



OUTSIDE CHANCE

By R. T. MAYNARD



LEFTLY - APPLIED rouge couldn't mask the chalky pallor of her cheeks. Her mouth was a tremulous crimson blossom against deathly whiteness. She walked into the *Morning Planet* city room unsteadily, like a person drunk—or drugged.

Ken Fitch, city editor on the night side, happened to glance up from the headline he was readying—a headline that would split the town wide open. Less than two hours ago he'd had a visit from Cokey Joe Breen, who had spilled the facts behind that headline—for a cash consideration. And now, seeing the blond girl approaching, Ken Fitch stiffened with surprise.

"Letha Starke!" he muttered.

She came falteringly toward the raised platform where his desk was situated—the dais from which he could keep a watchful eye on reporters, rewrite men, and copy-desk slaves under his charge. Pendant green-shaded incandescents sent reflected glints of light shining against the oncoming girl's metallic yellow hair, revealing every perfectly-spaced wave of her artistic coiffure. Her lush curves were stressed by an expensive mink coat drawn tightly about her, so that each step she took

revealed the bold, arrogant lines of her slinky figure.

"Ken——!" she whispered as she gained the platform.

He frowned. He didn't get up from his chair. A swift, roving glance informed him that every masculine eye in the room was appraisingly fastened on his visitor. Her blatant beauty always did that to the men she encountered. Typewriters had ceased clattering; there was only the steady, spaced click of teletype printers to mar the admiring hush that had fallen over the night crew.

Confronting Ken Fitch, the girl's back was turned to the others. Her pale blue eyes wavered to meet his gaze. "Ken——!" she whispered again, pleadingly.

He flushed, conscious of the knowing grins on the faces of his subordinates. "Well, Letha, what's on your mind?" His tone pointedly lacked cordiality. He cast a look toward a desk at the far end of the room—Molly Kildare's desk.

MOLLY KILDARE was petite, red-haired, wholesomely feminine and a crack reporter. Also, she was Ken Fitch's fiancée; they were to be married next month. He didn't like the idea of Molly seeing him talking to Letha Starke. Molly

Long since, he—or so he thought—had outgrown his infatuation for Letha. But now she came to him. She was in trouble. She had killed a man! While his fiancée watched, he had to make his decision. Would he help Letha?



"I met him on a party," she confessed. "I k-killed him. You've got to help me get rid of the corpse!"

knew of his infatuation for Letha five years ago—an infatuation he had long since outgrown. Would Molly misunderstand this present meeting?

But she wasn't paying any attention. She was pawing through a desk-drawer as if searching for mislaid notes. Apparently she hadn't even noticed Letha Starke's entrance into

the city room. Ken was relieved.

Again he stared up into the blue eyes of the blond girl. Irritated, he repeated: "What's on your mind, Letha?"

"I'm in trouble, Ken. Ghastly trouble. I need you—desperately."

His lips took on a wry twist. "So you've come back to me after five years. After giving me the frigid

air. After taking me for my bank-roll and then handing me the gate. Now you say you need me. Rather ironic, don't you think?"

"You don't understand, Ken. This is different. I'm not asking you to forgive me for what I did to you. That's buried. I was a fool—and I learned my lesson. Too late. But now I've got nobody else to turn to. If you don't help me, they'll send me to the electric chair!"

He was startled. He crushed out his cigarette. "What do you mean by that?"

"Ken—I just killed a man." She unfastened the fur coat and permitted it to fall open.

He choked back his sharp exclamation of surprise. She was wearing an evening gown of white satin that adhered like a caress to her lovely body. She was magnificently contoured. Her hips swelled against the clinging silk, and her snowy bosom was daringly revealed by deep-slashed décolletage. One shoulder-strap dangled, torn as if in some struggle. The front of the gown was splotted and splattered with reddish brown stains. He guessed their meaning before she spoke.

"Blood, Ken," the yellow-haired girl whispered as she closed the coat about her.

He regained composure. "So you killed a man."

"Yes In my apartment. And hour ago."

"Who was he?"

"I—I don't know, Ken."

"You don't know? Then what the devil was he doing in your apartment?"

She reddened painfully. "I met

him on a wild party this evening. He insisted on taking me home. I didn't think he'd—"

"Wait a minute, Letha. You're lying. I don't believe you."

"Oh, I know." Her smile was rueful and forced, without mirth. "You don't believe I'd ever sink low enough to invite a total stranger to my apartment. Well, Ken, you're quite wrong. I was drunk. And I thought I didn't care. The steps always lead downward — eventually. To the gutter."

He scowled thoughtfully. "What about your pal DeWitt Ragan? I thought he was footing your bills?" Asking that, Ken casually covered the headline and the typewritten sheets on his desk—the story he'd been writing when Letha appeared. The story given to him by Cokey Joe Breen.

He didn't want Letha to see that headline—because, oddly enough, it dealt with this very DeWitt Ragan now under discussion.

The blond girl said: "Ragan? He ditched me more than a month ago—the rat."

THAT struck Ken as sardonically amusing. It was funny to hear her call anybody a rat for ditching her—considering how she herself had ditched Ken, more years ago than he cared to remember. He said: "So Ragan gave you the bum's rush. And since then you've been entertaining strangers. And tonight you croaked one. Why?"

"He was a b-beast. I discovered I couldn't bring myself to . . . let him maul me."

"Hm-m-m. So what happened?"

"I tried to get him to leave quietly.

But he got nasty. There was a struggle. I p-picked up a brass candlestick and hit him over the head. . . ." Her knees seemed to grow wobbly under her. "Ken—Ken—you've got to help me get rid of that corpse; I d-don't want to go to the chair!"

He came to a sudden decision. "Okay. I'll see what can be done." He scribbled some instructions to Biff McQuaide, his assistant; called McQuaide to the desk and left him in charge. Ken and the blond girl walked toward the exit.

They had to pass Molly Kildare's desk. Ken stopped for a moment while Letha swept onward. He leaned down over the petite red-haired girl. "Be back in a little while, honeysweet. Wait for me."

Molly's eyes were deep violet pools of worry. "You're going out with that Starke woman?"

He grinned and nodded. "Not jealous, are you?"

"N-no . . ." Molly's adorably piquant face wore a troubled expression; her firm little bosom rose and fell swiftly, as if with inner tumult. She laid a hand gently on Ken's arm. "No. I'm not jealous. But something tells me you're walking into danger, Ken. Intuition—"

He brushed her lips tenderly with his mouth. "Don't be foolish, sweetheart. I'll be okay." He went out.

Downstairs, Letha Starke had a taxi waiting. In the tonneau's darkness she sat close to him, so that he could feel the warm, insinuating softness of her, impinging on his own muscular solidarity. There'd been a time, long ago, when his blood would have run faster at her nearness. His arm would have stolen around her

waist in a crushing embrace; he would have buried his face in the perfectly-coiffed masses of her yellow hair and then searched demandingly with his lips for her waiting, sensuous mouth. . . .

But not now. That was irrevocably ended. He sat quietly, almost serenely. He paid no attention to her coquettish challenge.

She seemed to sense his indifference. "You hate me, don't you, Ken?"

"No. I passed that stage, years ago."

"Then why are you so cold to me?"

"Listen, Letha. I happen to be in love with someone else. The real thing this time. A girl named Molly Kildare. I'm going to marry her next month."

"She's the one you kissed, back in the office? The red-haired one?"

He smiled. "Yes. So you were watching?"

"I was. I couldn't h-help it. She's sweet, lovely. Oh, Ken—if only things had been different! If I hadn't been such a silly, stupid fool, five years ago. . . !"

"Forget it," he told her.

"Ken—why are you so willing to help me now, if you don't care anything about me?"

He shrugged. "Maybe because I'm a sentimentalist. Here we are at your place." He helped her from the cab and paid the tariff.

THEY went upstairs to the second floor of the building. She unlocked her door and switched on the living-room's lights.

"The c-corpse is in here . . ." she whispered. She took his arm and led

him into her boudoir, clinging closely to him as they stepped over the threshold. She pointed to her mussed bed.

A man lay there, face upward; his glazed eyes staring blindly at the ceiling. His skull was crushed in. Blood and smeared brains stained the pillows.

Ken Fitch drew a sharp breath. "Good God—!" he rasped. "*Cokey Joe Breen!*"

And then something smashed down on his head, from behind. Something that thudded viciously against his temple as he wheeled around. Something that sent blasting fires of agony searing into his brain.

He pitched forward. The floor seemed to come up and strike him on the face.

Over the roaring in his ears he heard a man's voice snarling: "*Got the lousy snoop!*" Then came Letha Starke's callous, amused tinkle of laughter.

Ken struggled drunkenly to his knees, felt blood running down his cheek from the cut in his scalp where the blackjack had laid the flesh open. He blinked back his daze as he stared up into a man's leering features.

"DeWitt Ragan . . . !" he mumbled thickly.

His tuxedoed attacker, president of the Ragan Construction Company, snarled: "Right. And if you start anything, I'll feed you another dose of the same."

A surging seethe of fury entered Ken's soul. He bounced to his feet as anger gave him new strength. He lunged at Ragan; bashed a knotted fist at the contractor's snarling mouth. The blow connected solidly.

Ragan's gums spouted blood like squeezed sponges, and he spat out broken shards of teeth as he staggered back. Fitch followed him, battered at him—

Blam!

Another man had leaped into the room. He had a reversed automatic in his hand. He thudded it against Ken's head savagely. And this time the lights went completely out for the newspaperman.

WHEN he opened his eyes, he was trussed to a chair in the living room. De Witt Ragan was bloodily grinning at him, his arm encircling Letha Starke's supple waist. Over on the divan sat the man whose blow had stretched Ken Fitch unconscious. Ken recognized the fellow as Ragan's chauffeur.

Ragan said: "You lousy sap! So you wanted to help Letha, eh? Too bad, sucker. Because I'm dealing the cards my way from now on."

"Meaning—?"

"You know damned well what I mean. Cokey Joe Breen spilled his guts to you tonight about my city hall contract for the new bridge across East Bay. You figured to pin back my ears by running a scoop on the graft I'm getting."

Ken blinked. "So you caught Breen and made him squeal."

"He squealed, all right. And now he's dead. Which is what you'll be—unless you kill that story about me."

Squirming against his fetters, Ken rasped: "Have another guess, Ragan. That story runs in tomorrow morning's edition. You can't stop it."

"No. But *you* can. And you will."

The newspaperman laughed



shortly. "Go ahead and do your damnedest, you filthy crook. The minute you turn me loose and send me back to the *Planet* office, I'll blast hell out of you. Not only for graft—but for murder." He glanced significantly toward the boudoir, where Cokey Joe Breen's body lay.

"No — for God's sake!" he shouted.
"I'll kill the story!"

Ragan approached the chair. He raised his fist, smashed it to Ken's jaw. He snarled: "Shut up!"

Ken shook his head jerkily to clear away the blur. Then he grinned again.

"You think you can scare me by beating me up? Nuts, Ragan! You're a bigger fool than I thought you were."

The contractor's scowl was savage with wrath. "Hero stuff. Maybe you won't feel so brave when your red-haired girl friend ankles in here."

Ken stiffened. A sudden icy shock trickled down his spine. "What—!"

"Yeah." Ragan laughed triumphantly. "I phoned the *Planet* while you were knocked out. I imitated your voice. I talked to your sweetie. I asked her to come up here right away. She's on her way now."

Flooding, impotent rage churned in Ken Fitch's heart. Molly Kildare—walking straight into a trap! Sweet, unsuspecting Molly—heading innocently into murderous danger! "You wouldn't dare—!" he shouted.

Ragan's lips peeled back from his broken teeth. "No? Guess again. *I'll bet that's her now!*" he added as a knock sounded on the door.

Ken twisted ineffectually against the ropes that held him. He raised his voice. "Molly—for God's sake—*run!*" he shouted hoarsely.

But Ragan's ape-like chauffeur had already launched himself at the door, jerked it open. He reached out, made a grab—and dragged Molly into the room.

The red-haired girl went white as she clawed at her captor. She saw Ken Fitch tied to the chair, and her

violet eyes widened in terror "Ken——!"

The chauffeur slapped her viciously across the mouth, his hard palm splatting like the report of a gun. "Button your kisser, babe!" he growled.

She staggered; then she renewed her struggles. She kicked at the thug; tried to pound his face with her tiny fists. He twined his fingers in her auburn hair; jerked her head far back. He struck her again; tried to carry her across the room.

She fought him like a tigress. His hand caught in the neck of her frock, ripping it from one shoulder. She wailed and tried to cover the flesh exposed under the torn material. Her attacker forced her to the divan and bounced her against the cushions. The hem of her skirt flew up past her stocking-tops. There was a flash of smooth, ivory skin.

Beaten, cowed, she crouched shivering on the sofa as the chauffeur pinned her wrists. He grunted: "Be good or I'll sock you again, sister."

LETHA STARKE interrupted. "No, you needn't bother. I want that pleasure for myself. String her up to the chandelier."

Ken Fitch's throat went dry. "You damned fiends—you can't get away with this!"

Ragan snarled: "Shut up, snoop. Don't make me slug you unconscious. I want you to be awake—so you can see what's happening." He helped his chauffeur bind Molly's wrists with a length of clothesline. Then they lifted her to the center of the room; fastened the rope to the overhead lighting-fixtural.

The red-haired girl dangled there,

moaning; her little feet barely touching the floor. Ragan took off his leather belt and handed it to Letha Starke. "Okay, kiddo. Have your fun."

Letha stepped forward, prepared to lash Molly with the strap.

Ken Fitch shouted again. "No—for God's sake—!"

The yellow-haired woman laughed; brought the leather belt swishing venomously in a circling arc. Splat! The belt stung into Molly's smooth flesh, left a red weal on white, where its end touched her bare shoulder. *Splat!* Again the improvised whip licked out. Molly whimpered—

Ken roared: "Quit! Stop it! I'll kill that damned story! I promise!"

But Molly Kildare's voice halted his outcries. "No, Ken. Let them go ahead and whip me. If it's something that should be printed—*print it!*"

Her proud eyes swept the room. She faced Letha Starke. "Go ahead. Help yourself."

Letha started to strike once more. But Ragan grabbed the strap. "Nix, kiddo. I've got a better scheme."

"What do you mean?"

He untied the red-haired girl; carried her to the divan. Then he winked at his chauffeur. "All right, guy. I've been watching you. You've had your eye on this dish ever since she ankled in. Well—she's yours!"

Helpless fury scalded Ken Fitch's soul. "You rats—you lousy, stinking swine! You can't—you wouldn't—"

Ragan slugged him in the mouth, silenced him. He tasted the salt tang of his own blood from split lips. Raging, struggling vainly against the cords that held him to the heavy chair, he saw the chauffeur go to

the divan and lean over Molly's cringing form. . . .

She whimpered—once. Then the thug had her in his arms; glued his thick lips to her averted mouth.

Wildly Ken shouted: "Stop! I give in! I swear it! I'll kill the story—I'll do anything you say!" And this time Molly gave him no contradiction. . . .

Ragan grunted: "Okay. Let up, Terry."

The chauffeur released Molly; growled sullen reluctance as he swung around.

RAGAN was at work on Ken's bonds. He snarled: "Listen, Mister. I'm giving you this one chance. You're going back to the *Planet* office. You're going to destroy every bit of the stuff Cokey Joe Breen gave you. I'm sending Terry with you—in case you try any funny stuff. He'll have a roscoe, and he hasn't got any scruples about using it."

Ken Fitch was desperately sparing for precious minutes. "Your gorilla won't have to shoot me, Ragan. I give you my word I'll destroy that story. Nobody knows about it except me. All I ask is that you let Molly go—"

The contractor said: "Nuts, boy-friend. The jane stays right here—until you come back with proof that you killed that headline. I'm giving you thirty minutes to get the job done. If you aren't back here by then—well, something damned unpleasant will happen to your girl-friend. Gargle that one."

Ken stole a glance at Ragan's wrist-watch; saw that he'd been away from his city-desk five minutes

less than a full hour. His heart began to hammer against his chest. Five minutes to go. . . . It seemed like a bleak eternity stretching out before him. He knew that he didn't dare leave this apartment until that five minutes had snailed by. . . .

Time! He had to gain it somehow. Ragan had already untied the ropes at his ankles; was now at work on his wrist-bonds. The contractor was working swiftly. Too swiftly.

And then Ken was free. He swayed to his feet. Ragan stood before him. Over by the door was Terry, the chauffeur—with his fist in his coat pocket and an ominous bulge that told of an automatic's muzzle poking the cloth. Letha Starke hovered near the davenport, keeping guard over Molly. . . .

"Get going!" Ragan rasped.

KEN FITCH took a wild, desperate chance. He tensed his sinews—and went smashing at the contractor like a stone from a catapult.

The move took Ragan by surprise; bowled him backward. Ken's fist lashed out like pistons; impacted against his enemy's jaw. He felt the jarring thud all the way to his own shoulders.

Ragan's head snapped back as if hinged. He went down.

Letha Starke screamed a gutter cath. The chauffeur came slamming across the room, his gun drawn. He yelled: "Stand back, Miss Starke—I'll plug him!"

Ken dived for the floor. He hit the carpet just beyond where Ragan had fallen. He grabbed for the unconscious contractor; used the man's limp form for a shield. "Go ahead and shoot!" he panted.

The thug's finger relaxed its pressure on the trigger of the automatic. He darted sidewise, seeking a clear aim at the newspaperman. Ken rolled, keeping Ragan in front of him—

But he forgot Letha Starke. She darted in, flung herself on Ragan, dragged him aside. Ken was wholly exposed to the chauffeur's weapon, now. He scrambled to his feet, zig-zagging. With a blow of his fist he sent the blond woman sprawling. She went down in a flurry of white satin skirt; her chiffon legs kicked and thrashed as she landed.

The chauffeur jumped as Letha landed at his feet. He swerved around her. That was Ken's chance. He sailed full at his antagonist before the man could again raise his gun to firing position.

They met with a thumping crash of flesh against flesh, brawn against brawn.

From the divan, Molly Kildare screamed: "Ken—*look out! Ragan's getting up!*"

And then Fitch smashed his right fist square into the chauffeur's mouth. The fellow sagged; went to his knees. The automatic dropped from his hand. Ken lashed out with his foot; kicked the thug brutally. The chauffeur doubled over, retching and holding his middle.

Whirling, Ken saw Ragan coming at him—with a gun.

It was too late to scoop up the chauffeur's weapon. Too late to do anything—except brace himself for Ragan's bullet. The contractor's narrow eyes gleamed with murderous malice. He grated: "You asked for it—now take it!" He squeezed the trigger.

"Button your kisser, babe!" he snarled.

BUT even as his gun vomited flame, the apartment's door crashed inward. A knot of uniformed men came thundering into the room. Ragan's shot went wild; a slug screamed past Ken Fitch's ear.



And then the police **were** grappling with Dewitt Ragan, disarming him, handcuffing him. They jerked the fallen chauffeur to his feet, manacled him to his employer. And they lifted Letha Starke; pinioned her.

Ken Fitch saw his *Planet* assistant, Biff McQuaide, in the thick of things. He yelled: "Biff—thank God you got here before it was too late!"

McQuaide grinned. "You should have made it thirty minutes instead of an hour, from the looks of things."

DeWitt Ragan was snarling, fighting his handcuffs. "What the hell—who—how—"

Ken's eyes gleamed balefully. "You aren't quite smart enough, Ragan. In the first place, I knew Letha's story was a lie. I knew it the minute she walked into the *Planet* city room. I realized she was trying to trick me, trap me. That was obvious enough."

The contractor stared. "You—you knew?"

"Yes. Letha said she'd killed a man, in a struggle. She showed me blood-stains on her dress. Okay. The blood was genuine. *But there hadn't been any struggle. Because her hair wasn't mussed!*"

Ragan stiffened.

Ken went on. "You heard me. Her coiffure was a work of art. Not a single wave was out of place. So I knew her yarn about a struggle was all phony. So was her torn dress. So was everything else she told me.

"I figured she was lying when she claimed you'd thrown her over. If she was so damned hard up that she had to entertain strangers, what was

she doing with that expensive mink coat? Nothing added up right. So I guessed that she was trying to lure me into a trap.

"Who'd want to trap me? Nobody but you—on account of the story I was going to run about you. Well, I deliberately walked into your scheme, Ragan. Because I wanted to find out the truth about you. I wanted to make sure Cokey Joe Breen had handed me a right steer when he gave me that information about your grafting.

"I went haywire in just one detail. I didn't expect you to conk me and lure Molly Kildare up here. You almost won out by doing that. Almost—but not quite. Because when I left the *Planet* office I scribbled a note for McQuaide, my assistant. I instructed him to wait an hour—and then, if I hadn't returned, *he was to come to this apartment with a squad of cops.*"

RAGAN wilted. "I'll take a plea. They won't fry me . . ." he drooled. "I've got influence. . . ."

An officer jerked him toward the door. "Nuts, buddy. Get goin'."

Slowly the room cleared. One bluecoat was left to stand guard over Cokey Joe Breen's corpse in the adjoining boudoir. Ken Fitch slipped over to the divan; lifted Molly Kildare in his arms.

She clung to him fiercely. "Oh, Ken . . ." she whispered.

He kissed her. He said: "Let's not wait until next month, honey-sweet. What do you say?"

She wrapped her soft arms around his neck and held up her mouth for another kiss. It was all the answer he needed.

WISE GUY

By PAUL HANNA



UMPTUOUS as were the three skins of her silver-fox scarf, Cathleen Carlton, ex-showgirl, was far more appealing when she slipped the furs from her throat and dropped them in a soft, lush heap on Michael Lasher's desk.

Her dress—wine silk and hand-fashioned—clung to her figure with the tenacity of wet chiffon. A shirred bodice molded her fully-developed breast to perfection. Below the splendid bosom, the dress was a tight sheath for the slim svelteness of a delicate waist and the undulating lyre of her hips.

"Now, you *must* do it for *me*, Michael," she pleaded, her husky voice matching the beauty of her body. "After all, I *have* been nice to you."

The diamond merchant's fingers drummed on the desk top. Not since he had founded the American Diamond Associates, fifteen years back, had he gone through so hard a day. The new shipments . . . spirited bidding on a confiscated lot at the Revenue Office . . . Count Rossi in town . . . and now, *this*.

"Yes—yes," he replied. "Surely you have, Cathleen. I'm not denying that, but—but—" Worry lines radiated from the corners of his eyes. He seemed young, and yet indescribably old. The white on his temples and the gray streakiness of his hair were at odds with his broad shoulders and erect carriage.

"You see," he explained wearily, "the market is in a terrible state. Only today I watched a perfect twelve carat stone go for next to nothing. Ordinarily, I'd be glad to—"

She walked around the desk and seated herself on its broad, polished top, directly in front of him. A slit in her skirt parted the silk material, allowing it to fall away from her long, chiffon-clad limbs to a point above the rolled tops of her stockings.

She leaned back, her arms bracing her. The line from her throat to her knees was a rhythmic undulation, broken only by the curve of her breast, sharply delineated as the wine silk tightened over it.

"You know what I've done for you, Michael," she said meaning-

With a figure like hers, she should have been wearing a sarong in Hollywood. But to the diamond merchant she was a perfect salesgirl. How could he know that she included in her business all kinds of larceny, double-crossing—even murder!

fully. "You wouldn't want it publicized, would you?"

TEMPERING her threatening insinuation, she came off the desk and slid into his lap. Now she was sweet and voluptuously appealing, the siren offering her nectared lips and her honeyed body; the former wet and quivering, delicately scented and swollen.

An eddy of perfume, its pungency intensified by the warmth of her body, swam across Michael Lasher's nostrils.

"Kiss me, darling," she murmured throatily.

He tried to draw away, but her physical allure was a powerful magnet. Slowly . . . sensuously, her arms circled his neck and the flame of her mouth descended.

Lasher relaxed, unable to stem the torrent of emotion pouring over him like white-hot, molten steel.

It was always like this . . . once her body touched his . . . he was putty in her hands.

"Kiss me!" she breathed again, searing his mouth with the parted succulence of her lips.

Ten minutes later the buzzer on Kay Allen's reception room desk sounded twice. She whistled to a blond youth seated in a small foyer office off the reception room.

"Mr. Lasher wants you, Johnny."

Johnny Townsend leaped to his feet, clicked his heels, grinned boyishly and made for Michael Lasher's office. *En route* his hand shot out and playfully tousled Kay's bobbed, chestnut hair.

"Watch me wow that Follies dame!" he stage-whispered.

Cathleen Carlton had donned her

furs again when Johnny entered. She stood at one side of the desk, her right hip jutting out, a superb picture of poised seduction.

This was the first time Johnny had seen her when she wasn't in motion—passing through the reception room on her way to see Lasher—and he made visual hay while the sun was shining.

His eyes navigated the full route of her show-girl figure, from slim ankles to the blond sheen of her hair. The symphony of dulcet curves brought a pleasantly gnawing sensation, a dampness to his palms. Lasher's voice brought him back to the world of reality.

"Get me that Number Six packet of uncut stones, Johnny," he said. The pink tip of Cathleen Carlton's nervous tongue circled her lips, slowly. Johnny stifled a gulp, walked across the office, and passed into the safe-room.

He turned, moments later, and spread the paper folder of diamonds on the desk. His fingers trembled as he felt the girl edge close to him . . . so close that her thigh brushed his. He opened the folder at all four ends.

The stones, still unmounted, flashed a living, pulsating fire from their bed of white cotton. The hyacinth petals of the showgirl's fingers fondled the iridescent gems, their carmine tips blood-red rubies against the crystalline blue-white diamonds.

"That's the lot, Cathleen," Lasher said. He looked up at Johnny. "Count Rossi is in town, Johnny, and since Miss Carlton knows him well through certain theatrical connections, she thought

That scream of hers was the last
sound she ever made.



it might be wise if she approached him on this lot."

JOHNNY'S eyes shot from the glittering diamonds to Cathleen Carlton's magenta finger-tips, up the silk sheath of her arm, and came to rest on her moist, swollen lips. He could well understand how Enrico Rossi, a diamond buyer for a syndicate, could be influenced by her.

"I think it's a good idea," he said. "I had planned seeing Rossi myself, but I'm certain Miss Carlton will do a much better job." Johnny bowed and backed to the door. The showgirl's eyes followed him with more than just casual interest. They licked like tongues of flame.

As his hand fell on the door-knob, Johnny heard Lasher say: "I'll ar-

range for you to see Rossi tomorrow. In the meantime—"

In the outer reception room, Johnny jiggled in front of Kay. "Well, it's a New Deal all around, baby!" he chortled. "Sex in salesmanship! Buy our diamonds and get a hot mama *free!*"

Kay contemplated her pink nails. "Are you still raving?"

"Raving? Hell, no! We have a new sales person on the staff. Allow me to present"—He made a grandiloquent gesture—"Miss Cathleen Carlton! An eye for an eye, a gem for a gem, a kiss for a carat, and a body for—"

Michael Lasher's door opened and Cathleen Carlton swept through the reception room. The deep, pungent odor of perfume—Black Narcissus—followed in her wake. When she was gone, Johnny closed his eyes and sniffed audibly.

"Oh, what a gorgeous stink!" he murmured.

IT WAS the following afternoon. Kay, at the switchboard, glanced at her wrist-watch. Two-thirty. The day was dragging interminably. A click announced an incoming call on the board. She plugged in.

"American Diamond Associates. Good afternoon."

The dulcet, polished tones of a foreign voice came over the wire. "Meester Lasher, *piace.*"

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Lasher isn't in. Can I take a message?"

"A message?" The voice hesitated. "*Sì*; you will tell him that Count Enrico Rossi will be in the hotel until five o'clock tonight if he wish to see me. *Grazie.*" The connection broke.

Kay glanced at her scratch pad, noted that Lasher was at the Diamond Exchange, called the number.

"Good!" Lasher exclaimed over the phone. "Now call Miss Carlton and tell her to make arrangements to be at Rossi's suite at—well, say four-thirty. You'll find her phone number in my personal appointment book on my desk. I'll be back in an hour."

Kay carried out the instructions. At three-thirty Michael Lasher hurried into the office.

"You called Miss Carlton?"

"Yes, Mr. Lasher."

"Fine!" He walked into his office. "See if you can reach her for me now."

Through the open door, Kay heard one side of the conversation. "Get there about four-thirty, Cathleen," Lasher advised. "And please be careful with that packet. If you need me I'll be right here at the office."

He came out to the reception room a moment later. He looked worried. "You know what this is all about, Miss Allen, don't you?" he questioned.

Kay was caught off-guard. "Er—yes, Mr. Lasher—that is—"

"Well, in essence, I've intrusted a hundred thousand dollars worth of stones to Miss Carlton for possible sale to Count Rossi. But somehow—it's difficult to explain—I feel apprehensive about it all." He looked at her strangely. "You didn't listen in to the conversation I just had with Miss Carlton, did you?"

Kay flushed. "Why—er—no, Mr. L-Lasher."

He smiled. "Oh, I didn't mean it as a rebuke. I rather hoped you had.

You see, when I cautioned her to be careful about the stones, she said—she said: 'Don't worry, Enrico and I will take care of everything.' " He passed a hand over his damp brow. "It sort of worried me. Those stones aren't insured, and—"

Kay groped for words. "Then why don't you go up to Count Rossi with Miss Carlton, Mr. Lasher? If you're the least bit afraid, I would."

"You think—you think it would be all right?"

"Certainly."

He was back shortly, dressed for the street. "I'm going to do as you say. Call me at Count Rossi's hotel at five and give me whatever messages come in."

A curious cold chill passed over Kay as the door slammed behind him.

CATHLEEN CARLTON swept into the lobby of the *Crown Hotel*, a stunning vision in a black broad-tail coat and a smart, high-crowned felt hat to match. The heavy-lidded, violet fascination of her luminous eyes was expended even on the desk clerk as she inquired Count Rossi's room number.

The elevator in which she ascended became heavily permeated with her perfume. Its operator followed her with his eyes as she stepped out on the seventh floor and moved gracefully down the carpeted corridor.

Pausing before Room 705, her gloved knuckles rapped lightly on the door. A voice sounded from within.

"Come in."

The showgirl's hand found the knob, turned it. The door swung

open. She hesitated momentarily as only darkness greeted her, but the next moment an arm shot out and a damp hand clamped itself across her mouth. A reflexed scream broke from her lips but it was muffled behind the palm that gagged her.

She struggled to beat off her attacker, tearing, scratching, kicking. Her coat was ripped from her back and fell to the floor. In the dim, flickering light of an electric sign, she could see the outline of her antagonist.

She tried to wrench her mouth free, but another hand whipped around her, pulling the bodice of her dress off her body.

Fear gave her strength as she resisted being hurled to the floor. Hot, panting breath fanned her cheeks and an arm of steel encircled her waist. Suddenly the man tripped and his grip broke. Cathleen backed away.

Her blood-curdling screams split the gasping quiet of the room. When the first one broke like a thunderbolt, the shadowed figure leaped at her. Every nerve in her body froze as she saw the flash of a steel blade. It was the last pulsing second of life for her.

The knife hissed through the air, burying itself in the white softness of her breast. She hung for a moment, jaws agape, a soft, blood-soaked death rattle sounding in her throat. Then she sagged and dropped to the floor.

Her killer stepped to the door, flattened himself against it. Footsteps patted in the corridor. They moved slowly. He backed into the shadows, waited for the knock. It came.

KAY ALLEN glanced at her watch. Two minutes to five. She had been waiting for this moment ever since Michael Lasher had stepped out of the office. Her fingers trembled as she plugged a line in and dialed the *Crown Hotel* number. Long, anxious seconds while the connection was made.

Then, longer seconds while the hotel operator rang the room. Kay counted the rings. *One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . .* What was the matter? Why didn't someone answer? . . . *seven . . . eight . . .* then a *click*.

"Hello?" Kay glued her lips to the mouthpiece. "Hello?" There was a long, drawn-out gasp. Then faintly, like a far-away whisper: "*Help! Help!*"

Frantic, Kay clicked for the hotel operator. Her voice broke hysterically. "Send—send someone up to Count Rossi's room!" she screamed. "Something's happened!"

She heard the connection break. She plugged in another outside line, whipped the dial around as she called a number. Again that agonizing wait.

Then: "Universal Detective Agency? Let me speak to Mr. Dennert! Quickly!" Another interminable emptiness. At last a brisk masculine "Hello!"

Kay clutched the stem of the switchboard mouthpiece frantically. "Muck!" Her voice was a gasping pant. "Something terrible's happened at the *Crown Hotel*." She raced out the bare details. "Meet me there in ten minutes. I'm leaving immediately."

The seventh floor corridor of the *Crown Hotel* was jammed with

people when Muck Dennert and Kay stepped off the elevator. The private detective used his broad shoulders to good advantage and opened a path to the door of Room 705. There, a uniformed policeman barred his way.

Muck flashed his credentials, explained that Kay was Michael Lasher's secretary. The cop stepped aside, swung the door open. As Kay entered, her face went white and she moaned softly.

There, stretched out on the floor, the bone handle of a knife protruding from the crimson-streaked fullness of her breast, was Cathleen Carlton! Blood from the stab-wound had seeped to the floor, trickled to her white face, and formed a coagulated pool under her waxen cheek. The bodice of her dress was ripped away, the skirt bunched up high on her curved thighs.

A white-coated interne was down on his knees beside her half-nude body.

Horried, Kay turned away, only to have her eyes fall on the gray, tortured face of Michael Lasher. The diamond dealer was stretched out on the bed, one arm drooping limply over the side. Kay saw his fingers twitch and knew he was alive.

Muck greeted the homicide men on the case. He conversed with them in low tones, scarcely audible. Kay heard "fingerprints" . . . "bell-boy heard a shriek" . . . "Rossi." She closed her eyes and leaned against a wall. It was all so horrible . . . so ghastly. And what was more horrible was that Michael Lasher had anticipated it.

Her eyes fell on Cathleen Carl-

ton's white body, on the carmine peak of her stabbed breast. Kay clutched at her throat. She felt herself getting dizzy, losing her grip. The pool of blood under Cathleen Carlton's cheek seemed to melt and flow in her direction. Bright spots danced before Kay's eyes. She tried to cry out but darkness overcame her.

MUCK was leaning over Kay when she regained consciousness. Her eyes fluttered open and she studied her surroundings wonderingly. The rose hanging on the windows seemed strangely familiar. The highboy . . . the walnut coffee table. Then she realized she was in her own apartment.

"Feel better now?" Muck whispered.

She smiled wanly. "Yes, I'm all right. I—I guess the sight of it all made me sick. It—it was horrible!"

He sat beside her on the couch, cradled her hand in his. "Those things usually are—and this one was particularly bad."

Kay sat up, propped herself against pillows. "Tell me what happened, Muck. Tell me everything."

"There isn't much to tell, baby. Rossi is missing. So are the diamonds. The desk clerk and the doorman saw him come in at noon but nobody saw him go out. Your boss, Lasher, came up at ten after four. Rossi let him in and the next thing he knew something hit him. That's all we know about that."

"The Carlton girl came up at four-thirty. Five minutes later one of the bell-boys heard a scream from 705. He knocked at the door but someone told him it was noth-

ing. Then you called at five, and the ringing of the phone brought Lasher around.

"You know the rest. We've got one dead dame, a guy with a bump on his head the size of an egg, and no diamonds."

Kay's lips trembled. "But—but what are we going to do, Muck?" She explained how Michael Lasher had feared trouble, how the loss of the stones would ruin him. "Muck, you've got to do something!" she pleaded.

He shrugged. "Well, it's homicide's job, but I thought you'd feel this way about it so I did some moseying around. He produced a man's white handkerchief from his pocket. "I found this in the room. The bulls missed it." He spread the square of linen out. The initials "J. T." were embroidered into one corner.

The color drained from Kay's cheeks. She repeated the letters in a hoarse, terrified voice. Her fingers clutched his hands. "No! No! It couldn't be!"

Muck's eyes narrowed. "Know somebody with these initials."

"Yes, but—"

"Who is it?" He snapped out the query, reverting to type.

"Johnny Townsend!" Kay gasped. "He's a salesman in our office. But he couldn't have—"

Muck was on his feet. "In times like this, baby, I wouldn't trust my own mother. You want me to work on the case? All right. I'll break it tonight before the bulls mess everything up. You stay here and wait for my call." He leaned over, kissed her hurriedly, and then was gone.

THE superintendent at Cathleen Carlton's apartment reacted favorably to the detective's verbal and monetary persuasion. Muck entered the show-girl's sumptuously furnished suite, the atmosphere of which was redolent with violet scent. He passed into the dead beauty's boudoir and began a systematic search.

Anxious moments went by as he fumbled among flimsy undergarments which once had clung closely to the warm flesh now cold forever. In a dressing-table drawer he located a packet of letters and a red leather address book. Both went into his pockets. But there was still something more important he hoped to find.

Combing the room rapidly yet thoroughly, Muck finally came to the bed. He ripped off coverlet and blankets, baring the mattress. A slit in the material caught his eye. Searching fingers delved into the down, came out with a tissue paper package. There was no need for him to open it, but he did. Blue-white gems sparkled up at him.

At that moment, the unmistakable sound of a key grating in a lock reached his ears. He stiffened momentarily, then crossed to the light switch. The boudoir went dark as the door from the corridor opened and a male figure entered.

Muck's right hand flipped a gun from his pocket. He crossed the threshold separating boudoir from living-room.

"Don't move!" he barked.

But the shadow at the door failed to heed the order. It ducked low an instant before Muck's gun roared, and in the split-second spit of flame,

the detective saw hurtling shoulders coming at him. Before he could fire again, the shoulders struck, knocking him against the wall and driving the breath from his body.

A fist catapulted from nowhere and found a dizzying mark on the point of his chin. Muck's head swam, but somehow he managed to strike out with the butt of his gun. There was a dull, ghastly thud as the steel struck skull-bone. A crumpled body slid to the floor.

FIVE minutes later, Johnny Townsend, propped up in a chair, stared in stark terror at the man facing him with leveled revolver. The wallet Muck had taken from the jewelry salesman's pocket gaped open on the floor. The automobile driving license was missing from the isinglass window.

"So you're Townsend?" Muck said.

Johnny gulped. "Yes."

"Pretty piece of business you and the Carlton dame cooked up, wasn't it? All set to meet her here and skip with Lasher's diamonds and whatever Rossi had in his room. Or was it you who bumped both of them off?"

"God, no!" The denial leaped from Johnny's drawn lips. "She asked me to come back about this time. We were going to celebrate the sale she was sure she'd make. I—"

"Cathleen Carlton is dead . . . murdered!" Muck dragged it out, watching the twisted horror of Townsend's face.

"Dead?" he gasped.

Muck's hand dipped into his pocket, came out with the damning

handkerchief. "Yes, and this was found in Rossi's room where she was killed." He waved it under Johnny's nose. "It's yours, isn't it?"

Trembling fingers touched the wrinkled linen. "Y-Yes. But I didn't do it! I swear I didn't!"

"Then who did?"

"I—I don't know! I tell you I just came here because she asked me to!"

Muck's eyes narrowed. "How did you happen to have a key to the apartment?"

Sweat poured from Johnny's face. "She—she gave it to me."

"When?"

"Last night." His frightened eyes pleaded. "I—I can explain everything if you'll let me."

Muck's mouth twisted. "Go ahead, but make it good."

Johnny sucked in a deep breath. "I—I came here to see Miss Carlton last night. Mr. Lasher asked me to spend an hour or so with her to—to explain about some diamonds and their value."

"You spent an hour . . . or so?"

Johnny's bloodshot eyes flickered. "I—I couldn't help it! After I told her about the diamonds she got familiar. I didn't want to get mixed up with her but she made me. . . . I couldn't help it." He moaned softly. "Now—now she's *dead!*"

IF THIS was an act, it was a damn' good one! "That doesn't explain the handkerchief," Muck prompted. "What about it? You used it to wipe fingerprints off Rossi's door, didn't you?"

"No! I don't know about the handkerchief! Maybe I left it here! I can't remember. It's all hazy. She

was soft and white . . . alive then—" He buried his face in his hands and sobbed bitterly.

Muck looked on, puzzled. He was convinced Johnny Townsend knew more than he was telling, but there was one logic link missing in the chain. Reasoning that Cathleen Carlton salvaged the jewelry salesman with her charms and talked him into going in on a deal with her, why had she appeared at Rossi's hotel room at all, and why, when she appeared, were the diamonds hidden in her mattress?

How did she expect even to put up a front of selling the stones to Rossi? If the missing Rossi did the killing he must have seen the stones before he snuffed out the show-girl's life! How could he have if they were in the mattress? A sudden, startling thought shot through Muck's mind. He groped in his pocket for the dead girl's address book.

Johnny had regained some semblance of composure. His eyes, however, were red-rimmed, and his lips quivered spasmodically.

"Is that the best story you can tell about the handkerchief, Townsend?" Muck blurted.

"Yes . . . the only one."

The detective decided to take a blind stab. Sometimes it brought reactions. "You knew Rossi, didn't you, Townsend?"

Johnny nodded. "Yes. That is, I—I tried to sell him diamonds last year."

Muck counted off the seconds, allowing a dramatic silence. "You'd know him if you saw him again?"

"I—I think so."

"Could you identify him?"

"What do you mean?"

Muck snarled, putting macabre venom into his voice. "This is what I mean Townsend: Rossi is in the morgue! The police found his dead body in—"

The reaction came. Johnny's eyes rolled up. He gasped for air, clutching at his throat. Muck caught him as he slipped off the chair in a dead faint.

WITH Johnny in the custody of a homicide man, Muck set about thumbing through Cathleen Carlton's address book. He knew what he was looking for, but it was almost a hopeless task. In desperation, he chose five notations that were addresses without accompanying names. If his hunch had any merit, it would be one of them.

Four of the five addresses led up blind alleys. Two were hair-dressers, one a costumer, and the fourth a private party. Muck looked at the \$3.60 taxi meter figure and cursed. He was about to crumple the list up and toss it into the gutter, when a hunch hit him.

"All right, we'll try one more," he told the cabdriver. "220 Barclay Street."

It was a poor neighborhood and a worse house. Muck held a match to the lone letter box in the dark, musty hallway. He read the name with difficulty: *Alex Weyman*. For some reason or other it sounded good. Without pushing the button he walked up the flight of rickety stairs, knocked on the only available door. There was a scuffle of slipped feet within, then a cracked voice.

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Weyman?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to see you about a little business."

A CHAIN rattled and a bolt slipped. The door opened. Muck saw a wizened hunchback with pinched cheeks and whiskey-inflamed eyes. They darted over the detective, appraising him at a glance. Muck stepped in. He found himself in the living-room of a dirty flat. The only light came from an adjoining room. There was a sharp, tingling odor he knew but could not place.

"What is it you want?" Weyman questioned.

Muck stalled for time. Weyman looked like the right man and the murky hovel like the right place. Still, he *had* to be sure.

"Well, I've got a little job I'd like you to do," he said. "Miss Carlton recommended you." He watched the deformed man's eyes. They lit with understanding. He shuffled into the next room and beckoned Muck to follow.

There was a work table in the room, a curious contraption resembling a small blast furnace. That, and numerous bottles of vari-colored liquid.

"Let's see the stuff," Weyman said. "Is it diamonds?"

In a flash Muck knew why Alex Weyman's name and address was in the showgirl's possession. The hunch was good. His right hand slid surreptitiously to his hip pocket . . . just in case.

"Is that what you did for Miss Carlton, diamonds?" he asked nonchalantly.

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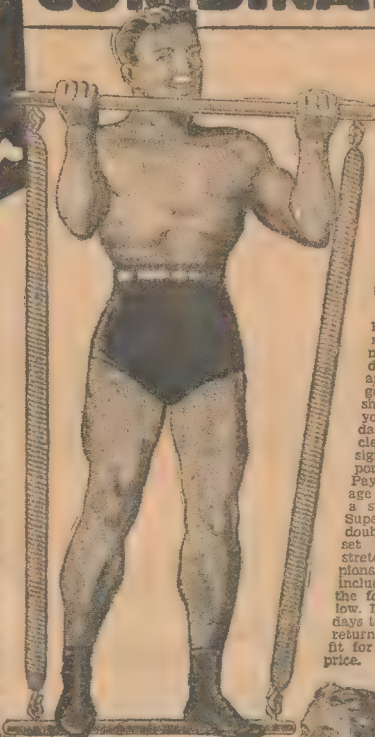
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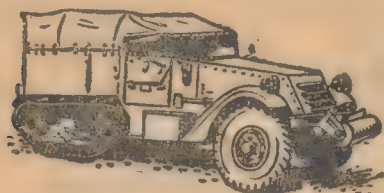
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Weyman stiffened. His hump shook beneath his jacket. "That's nobody's business but my own," he snapped. "Let's see your stuff."

Muck decided it was time for action. He dropped all pretense. "There isn't any 'stuff,' Weyman. I came here to find out whether you duplicated some uncut stones for Cathleen Carlton? You did, didn't you? You made her paste replicas of—"

The hunchback's right hand shot out with the speed of a bullet. His fingers closed about a bottle of yellow liquid. Its glass stopper flipped off.

Muck ducked, drawing his gun, just as a stream of the yellow liquid came in his direction. One drop of it spattered against his left hand. The moment it touched his flesh he knew what it was. *Sulphuric acid!* Blinding, burning, deadly sulphuric acid! He could feel that one drop gnawing into his flesh.

His gun came up. A tongue of flame belched from the barrel, but Weyman, with the agility of a panther, dropped under the screaming pellet of lead. As the gun went off he leaped at Muck's knees, hitting him hard and bowling him over.

They fought like tigers, clawing at each other's throats, straining to get a death hold. Muck had the power and strength, but Weyman the dexterity. The break came when they crashed against a table and Weyman's hump hit the leg. He screamed in agony, loosening his hold. Muck took the cue. The butt of his gun crunched against Weyman's deformity. Like a limp sack, the hunchback drooped.

MUCK waited only until the patrol wagon carted Weyman

away. His next port of call was the Crown Hotel. Now that *two* sets of diamonds were involved, *everybody* was in the picture.

The switchboard operator at the hotel, a pert, gum-chewing blonde, seemed more interested in Muck's appreciation of the "come-hither" glint in her eyes than the record of calls made by Rossi before his disappearance, but managed somehow to secure the desired information.

The desk clerk and doorman, both of whom had seen Count Rossi go in but not come out, were more loquacious.

That done, Muck hurried back to Kay Allen's apartment. She was nervous with apprehension until he outlined what had transpired. "Now, baby, it's your turn to shed a little light on this thing," he said. "Let's hear your part in the story from start to finish."

Kay told of Cathleen Carlton's coming to the office, of the arrangement whereby she was to try to sell Count Rossi, of Michael Lasher's concern after the plans had been made. At this point Muck interrupted.

"Did Rossi call Lasher at the office any time today?"

Kay hesitated, thinking back. "Yes, at two-thirty. I remember looking at my watch and thinking how slow the day was going."

Muck consulted his list. "What's the office number?"

"Winston 4-8500."

Muck shook his head. "Sorry to disagree with you, but in the first place Rossi made no phone calls today at all, and only two yesterday, before five o'clock." His forehead puckered. "Say, do you remember when the Carlton dame left the office with the diamonds yesterday?"

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"Yes, about four o'clock," Kay replied.

Muck leaped to his feet. "Come on! I think I've got it! There's just one little thing! Hop into a coat and we'll drop in on Lasher. If he can clear this up, we've got it!"

MICHAEL LASHER was propped up in bed in his bachelor apartment. A Japanese valet hovered about with the suave silence so common to Orientals. Muck and Kay sat at the bedside. Lasher's head was bandaged and he looked like a man who had gone through hell.

"I just came in to tell you that we've practically solved this thing, Mr. Lasher," Muck said. "We've established the fact that Count Rossi was missing since yesterday evening. We've also discovered that only one person might have any reason for wiping him out at that time."

Lasher breathed deeply. "I'm glad, Mr. Dennert. I sincerely hope you find the perpetrator of this awful crime." His eyes fluttered. "However, I have almost better news for you." Muck watched his fingers tense on the white coverlet. "The packet of diamonds was left here just twenty minutes ago. The doorbell rang, Saki answered it, and found a package. I opened it and there was the folder . . . with every diamond intact."

Muck started as the gem dealer reached beneath his pillow and extracted the white paper package. Lasher's nervous fingers unfolded the tissue. Imprisoned fire leaped from the stones. Muck extended his right hand and picked up the

largest of the flashing stones. He fondled it in his palm.

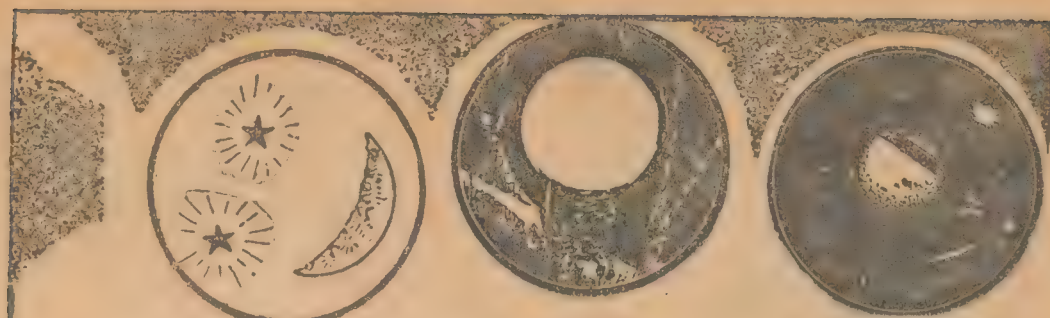
"There's just one little thing I'd like to clear up, Mr. Lasher," he said quietly. "It's about a phone call. Count Rossi called your office for an appointment at 2:30 this afternoon. Miss Allen took the message, but as a matter of fact it wasn't Rossi who called because he was in the hotel at that time and no calls were made. Townsend didn't do it since he was in your office at two-thirty. The only other possibility—"

The diamond dealer's hand shot beneath the pillow. Muck reached for his hip pocket moments too late. A vicious-looking .45 in Lasher's grip spoke eloquently.

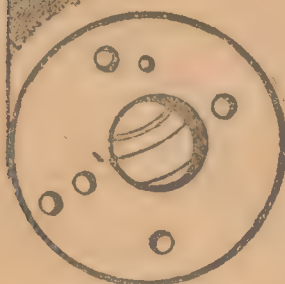
"Thought you had me down on my back, didn't you?" he snarled. "Well, *you* won't solve this thing, Dennert! Sure I killed that dirty slut. I killed her to get her off my back. She was bleeding me. I had to finish Rossi, too. They'll find his body in Room 709 at the hotel." He chuckled maniacally.

"Send them a message from where you're going! I don't give a damn! I won't be here to worry about it. These stones'll take me far, far away from danger."

Muck relaxed externally. "Not these diamonds, Lasher. They're just paste. Carlton was one up on you. When you stabbed her and took the stones from her bag, you took glass when you thought you were taking diamonds. The whole batch isn't worth five dollars and all your trouble of planting one of Townsend's handkerchiefs in Rossi's room, and the fake call, and everything else was wasted."

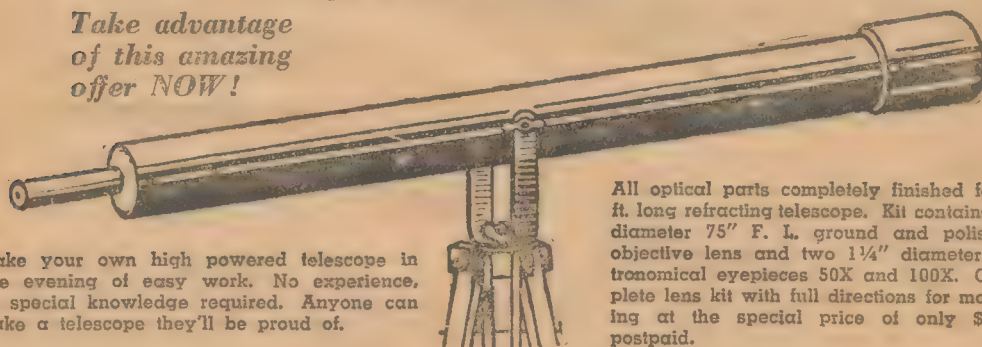


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Lasher laughed insanely. "You can't fool me with that line, Denbert. I know diamonds when I see them."

Muck dropped the gem he was holding, ground it beneath his heel. It crumbled away into a fine, white powder. Lasher's eyes popped from his head.

In that instant of relaxation, Muck leaped. The gun went off, booming through the room, but the bullet thudded harmlessly into the wall. Muck wrenched the weapon from the older man's grasp, stepped back.

"Get Police Headquarters on the phone, Kay," he snapped.

Kay's scream warned Muck in the nick of time. He wheeled as Saki, the Japanese, swung an iron poker down at his head. *Crunch!* The .45 smashed against the valet's skull. He went down quietly. Muck trained the gun back on Lasher. The diamond dealer was deathly white.

"Kill me! Kill me!" he pleaded.

Muck shook his head negatively. "No, Lasher, you should suffer. You were a wise guy. You didn't want to pay for passion and now you'll find out what a high price it demands. You'll sit in a cell for weeks thinking of that dead girl's white body with a knife stuck in it. You'll remember how you fondled that lovely form and then you'll see it with blood streaming down its smooth curves. You'll—"

The diamond dealer's maniacal shrieks rang through the apartment. He writhed and twisted, foaming at the mouth, caught in the tentacles of insanity. Muck stepped out of the room, drawing Kay with him. He held her in his arms, conscious of the trembling of her warm body, the

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51-56	500.00	1000.00	1500.00
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fluttering of her young bosom. The siren of a police car wailed into the night.

"But—but the real diamonds," Kay whispered. "What happened to them, Muck?"

The detective patted his pocket. "Right here, baby. I located them in the mattress in Carlton's bedroom."

"And all—and all for what?" she breathed softly, clinging to him.

His hand blanketed the frenzied beating of her heart. "All for what we're going to enjoy *without* paying for it, darling."

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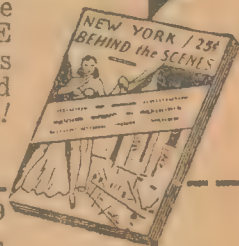
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THE DEADLY ONE

(Continued from page 45)

again, because they were bouncing over their own wake. He said, as though worried, "I always kept thinking that Mittelfarr was a funny name."

"Mine is Linden," she said. "That's the name of a tree. Although I'm not a tree, thank God. All names are funny, if you want to look at them that way. Just think of names like Smith, Allbright, Matthews, Valentine, Carraway, Turnipseed, Hutchinson, and so on. Some of them sound only like names for Pullman cars. Pullman is a funny name, for that matter."

"My name is Borg," he said flatly.

"Why shouldn't I like the name Borg?" she inquired with gentle silver laughter as they sped across the lake.

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THE FRANKIE & JOHNNY MURDER

(Continued from page 75)

It was almost fool-proof. If it came out that the kid had staged a fake publicity stunt that had gone sour, the cops would think he'd been slugged too hard by accident. There was nothing to connect his half-brother with the thing at all, except he'd got worried when he found I was going to put the pressure on Doll and her boy friends and might find out the original set-up.

I WAS telling Frankie about it the next night, while Johnny was over in the place keeping an eye on things. She was giving Frankie a break at Frankie's own request.

"It was a cinch, once I cut my head in," I said. "Here's this guy, supposed to be a stranger down here. Yet he knows his way back to the hotel from here, even telling me streets and all. I'd driven out here, but I didn't remember street names, and nobody else does the first time out. Then he manages to find himself a hot hotel and puts on an all-night party there. He could have picked up a girl, of course, but it would have been strictly business then and no party like he was on. It proved he'd been here before and he'd have said so if he didn't have something to hide. They'll stick him along with the two thugs he hired for the actual killing."

"What about Doll and Mickey Sims and Hennessy? Will the cops do anything about that fake hold-up?"

"No. Why should they? The kid wanted it done."

"Then money was back of it all."

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Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

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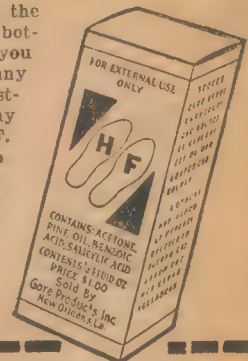
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"Sure. It always is."

"Not on everything," Frankie said, sitting up. "Not by a damn' sight it ain't. You can't tell me it was money that made you quit me last night and spend that time with Doll Higgins. Maybe you can tell me, but I won't believe it. And it wasn't because you were afraid Sims would come in and beat her up, either."

"That was just business, honey."

"Then what's this?"

I said: "This is just paying what I owe you, lover. Didn't you tell me you had an investment in me?"

She said she'd had her investment back with interest.

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You need send no money—just mail coupon now. We will send you the "Complete Weight Reducer" for 5 days' free examination. When it arrives, deposit \$1.98 (plus a few cents for postage and handling) with the postman. Follow its simple instructions immediately and start reducing. If within 5 days you are not convinced that this shows you the way to considerable weight loss, pounds and inches, you may return it and we will instantly refund your deposit of \$1.98 in full. Remember you risk nothing in mailing the coupon. This is your great opportunity of becoming slimmer and slimmer. So act NOW!



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The nationally-known PENMAN recently introduced a brand new fountain pen. It's the popular shaped model, backed by a guarantee of life service and has most of the features formerly found only on high-priced pens. Because of the national emergency, the supply of rubber and steel for essential parts of this wonderful pen is limited and the stock of pens on hand must be closed out. So, through special arrangements, this nationally-advertised fountain pen is priced amazingly low to our readers for quick clearance. Regulation size, it is a real beauty. It has 14k. gold-plate military clip that meets army and navy regulations... visible ink supply gauge... 14k gold-plate velvet smooth pen point that writes bold or fine, as your prefer. To fill this amazing fountain pen, just use the famous push-button filler. Instantly your pen holds enough ink to write thousands of words. The barrel is the new, everlasting simulated pearl, beautiful and strong. You have your choice of a variety of popular colors. For a wonderful guaranteed fountain pen like this you might expect to pay \$2... \$3... \$4! At even \$5, a year or so ago, this amazing fountain pen would have been a real bargain.

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**FOR PROMPT ACTION... Your Full Name in
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Yes, the coupon below entitles you to one or two of these nationally advertised Push-Button Fountain Pens for only 69¢ (two for \$1.25)... and for prompt action your name will be imprinted on your pens without charge! This is the one advertising bargain you can't pass up! If you don't have a fountain pen now, this is your chance to get a life service pen for only 69¢ and get your name in gold letters on it free. But you must act promptly. The supply, due to the national emergency, is definitely limited. Don't wait—clip the coupon and mail it today sure.

SEND NO MONEY

**... Just Mail the
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Pay Postman On Guarantee of 100% Satisfaction or Your Money Back!

Will you accept this friendly challenge? Will you send for this amazing value fountain pen on ten days' trial? Are you willing to be convinced that a guaranteed-for-life fountain pen need not be expensive? Then clip the coupon and mail it today. Send No Money! When your fountain pen arrives, deposit 69¢ for each pen you order (2 for \$1.25), plus postage charges. Then inspect your pen carefully. See how more easily it fills, how wonderfully neat it writes. Read the guarantee of life service that accompanies every pen. See your name imprinted in gold on your pen or pens. Then, if you don't agree you've made a fountain pen discovery that may save you a great many dollars, if you aren't so proud of your pen you want to show it to everyone, if you aren't 100% satisfied in every way, simply return the pen within ten days and get Your Money Back for the asking! Remember, this is an advertising offer only. Don't expect to get this amazing pen value with your name imprinted free, for long. You must act right away. Clip the coupon... send for your beautiful, guaranteed-for-life, push-button fountain pen right now. The price is only 69¢ each, C.O.D. (2 for \$1.25).

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10-DAY TRIAL COUPON

Send two (2) brand-new Push Button Fountain Pens with names imprinted as checked below. On arrival I deposit \$1.25 plus postage with postman on understanding these pens are backed by a guarantee of life service... also I may return pens for any reason within 10 days and get my money back.

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Imprint These Names FREE on Pens

Imprint These Names FREE on Matching
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- ☐ Matching Automatic Pencil 39¢
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CHECK COLOR:

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☐ Gray
☐ Brown
☐ Green
☐ Burgundy (Red)
☐ Send postpaid, enclosed fund \$.....
If C.O.D., postage extra.

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